
ねじ巻き精霊戦記
天鏡のアルデラミン
Alderamin on the Sky
IX
宇野朴人
Uno Bokuto
Illustration 竜徹
キャラクター原案 さんば挿

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Characters
Alderamin on the Sky
エルルファイ・テネキシェラ
キオカ海軍少将。何事につけ懐の深い、おおらかな性格の女性将校。性的にも奔放で、多くの男性と関係をもつことを厭わない。しかし、その愛情は深く、身内を傷つけられると烈火のごとく怒り狂う、母性の人。
グレーキ・アリュザドリ
キオカ海軍海佐。海兵隊長。たびたび恫喝的な振る舞いで部下を怯えさせるが、その半分はパフォーマンスで、本来は慎重かつ思慮深い性格。上官のエルルファイのことを慕いながらも、苦言も呈する頼りになる軍人。


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UNO BOKUTO PRESENTS
ILLUSTRATION : RYUTETSU／CHARACTER DESIGN : SOU SANBA
「Mum、はまったようだね
あまり趣味のいい手とは
言えないけれど」
「どうすりゃいい……
このままじゃ
ジリ貧だぞ」


天鏡のアルデラミン
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電撃文庫

コミック版『アルデラミン』作者 **川上泰樹** 特別寄稿



Someone carried a pond to the sky and accidentally spilled all the water —The rain was so heavy that it wouldn't be a surprise if someone used such a metaphor.

His foot sunk up to his ankle with every step he took, and he had to shake off the heavy mud to move forward. The tree branches in the mountain path shield him from the rain, but visibility and road conditions were deteriorating. Night made it even harder to make out the terrain.

「Oh god, god...」 「Please watch over us—」

The mixed gender trio relied on the light from the point man's Luminous Sprite as they prayed and moved along the path covered in swampy compost. The thick smell of the vegetation in the tropical forest made it hard to breath and creatures were squirming around in the darkness. All these were extremely creepy to them.

「Hah... Hah... Yiik!」

Patah— the sensation of something dropping on his neck made the man shiver. He groped his neck and touched a cold and slimy thing in the forest. He tossed it away in a hurry, feeling disgusted just from looking at it.

「L-Leeches again...!」

「Calm down...! It will be bad if you fall from getting spooked!」

The woman behind cautioned. This calmed the man down and he forged on again. He pulled up the hood that he removed when they entered the woods and made himself small as he walked. Now wasn't the time to worry about the heat, his feet would get engulfed by the mud if they stopped.

「... I think it’s around here...」

The woman prayed that they didn’t take the wrong path and mumbled. After that, the man shouted.

「...! Hey, light! I see light!」

He extinguished his partner’s Lantern and pointed ahead. The two behind him squint their eyes to see ahead and could make out a faint light beyond the thick woods. Their faces lightened up as they walked towards the light with hope in their hearts.

「We are here, the cabin in the hill...!」

The large plain building erected from logs stood sturdily in the storm, illuminated by a High Beam. The structure stood on stilts as a measure against flooding. The three of them hurried to the stairs leading up to the entrance and pounded on the door made from heavy wood.

「Hey, we are here! Open up!」

The man pounded repeatedly. Tens of seconds later, a calm voice came from behind the door.

「—Fauli 5:12. What price did the Prophet Fauli pay to cross the Shie Rahad barren lands?」

The sudden question surprised the man. But he was a man of the cloth and came up with the answer after thinking briefly.

「S-Sixty sheep and one string of gold coin… and the sacrifice of his second son Rikutaf.」

Click～ the door unlocked and then opened slowly before them.

「Enter.」

The three moved in without waiting for the invitation. Blurred Lantern lights were spread out around the place, tired people leaned on each other at the lights, they number about 40. It was relatively crowded for the cabin.

They all had one thing in common, a white dot on the chest of their dark attire. A priest robe with the constellation of the god they serve.

「Everyone's here then.」

The man standing alone deep inside the room said after making a headcount. When they heard that, one of the trios who just entered said:

「Wait, Hadin… Where's Bishop Hadin? Are you here, it's me, your roommate in the Seminary dorms, Theorico.」

One of the priests shook his head at the man searching for his friend.

「Bishop Karufa isn't here. Or rather, he couldn't come… I heard he got marked by the army before he set off.」

「He — got arrested?」

The priest nodded bitterly, and that man stood still stiffly. Seeing that, another priest interjected.

「... That's how the world is. Everyone took great risk to be here, so don't panic now.」

「That's right, we should worry about this place being uncovered. I don't want to see the army barging in and take us all in.」

Half of the priests coldly accepted the fact that one of their own had been captured by the army. They became very pragmatic after experiencing danger themselves.

「As servants of god, I believe no one would be that careless. There isn't much time, let me get straight to the point.」

After giving this opening statement, the priest at the deepest part of the room pulled off his hold. He was a young man with a stern face.

「I'm Deacon Gutan, from the Ra Saia Alderamin Central Cathedral, Sacred Affairs, Section 6. My rank in the holy hierarchy is lower than everyone here, but I bear a message from the Pope and I hope everyone will listen as if His Holiness is here.」

The room turned tense when he mentioned the Pope. When the room had quieted how, Deacon Gutan spoke:

「The time to do your sacred duties have come.」

His first words made all the priests frown. Deacon continued before the confused crowd.

「It has been far too long since the Katjvarna Empire commited sacrilege on our religion. People are losing heart, their ethics and public order. They have forgotten their gratitude and reverence to the lord who blessed us with the Sprites.」

He was a first-class spokesman who urged the clergy in the Empire.

「Needless to say, the reason lies with the Royal family. The tyrannical Royals make light of religions, ignore the crimes of the nobles, and the military who serve them are just as guilty. I believe everyone has already heard their footsteps closing in as the time of judgement draws near.」

「... So, you want us to revolt?」

A young priest butted in even though it was rude. They couldn't spare the effort to listen quietly to such a speech.

「Are you kidding me— We didn't come here to listen to this. We only want to know one thing, when will the two nations resume diplomatic relations!?」

「I feel the same. Since the war in the northern territory, we are separated from the religious headquarters, do you understand how awkward our status in the Empire is? The path towards the main cathedral had been sealed, so we couldn't even perform the annual pilgrimage! The ranks that needed approval from the pope had been postponed for two years! The graduates from the Seminary can't be assigned to their posts...!」

「...That's right. Without the official baptism and recognition from the Sprites, they will never be a part of the clergy. It will be fine if their predecessors are still around, but we won't live forever… If this goes on, the clergy will go extinct in the Empire.」

A middle-aged female priest and an elderly male priest shored up the argument of their young colleague. The old man continued.

「Could this be— I don't think this is possible but is this the will of the Main Cathedral… the will of the Pope?」

The eyes below his white brows glared with hostility at the other party. Deacon Gutan snorted.

「—Absurd. God demands us to learn the virtue of patience and it might come in the form of an extended trial. But God will never abandon us. That will never happen.」

「That would be wonderful. According to you, the Pope won't ordered us to incite a rebellion that had no chance of succeeding, right.」

The old priest warned with a strong tone. The place grew tense and a voice came from a corner.

「... Anyway, you fail to clearly understand the situation within the Empire. The citizens here wouldn't dare, even after experiencing a military coup. The ones with a historical link to the old warring era might be eager, but they are kept in check by the young Empress... Who would even think of resisting the government in such a situation?」

His words were crude, but that was how most of the people present thought. As the people around him concurred with him, the male priest with a stubble beard continued:

「Even the children know that the Main Cathedral and Kioka are working together — but if this means cutting off the followers of Aldera in the Empire, we have our plans to counter too.」

Numerous eyes with dangerous gleam surrounded the Deacon. A female priest with a Luminous Sprite in her arms stood up and declared.

「Gathering all the devotees in the Empire and separating entirely from the sect in Aldera… If push comes to shove, we might opt for that path.」

It was the consensus of everyone present. Exposed to this overwhelming pressure, Deacon Gutan curled his lips.

「Independence, huh—? A grand declaration, but I want to ask. How do you plan to do so?」

He looked straight back at the people staring at him, his steadfast attitude intimidating the priests around him.

「Everyone, please remember, you have not been bestowed with the sacred rites. There is no way for you to induct believers into the clergy, or the miracles of the Sprites. All the Sacred Duties have been our responsibilities, while you have just been following orders. If you separate from the Main Cathedral, you won't amount to anything. Isn't that what's happening right now?」

Deacon plainly explained the power relationship between the priests and the Main Cathedral.

「Once you lose the prowess of a priest, will the reigning Empress still let you manage the churches? I heard the Empress has implemented harsh draconian policies. Going by historical records, such a person will quickly think of exterminating priests that obstructs her rule, and monopolize the grace of God.」

The priests fell silent. They came here despite the risks because they were worried about that. The reigning Empress had never expressed any good will towards the Church of Aldera. What they fear was the Empress viewing the church the same as the corrupt nobles of the old faction that needed to be purged.

In the room that fell silent once more, Deacon Gutan shrugged with a sigh.

「...I seemed to have surprised you too much. Please remain calm, we have no intention of urging you to revolt. You are mistaken.」

As dubious gazes fell on him again, he said with a relaxed smile.

「If there are no place for you in the Empire, you only need to escape to our side.」

The place turned quiet yet again. No one could understand what his words meant.

「......Huh?」

「I’m saying that you should escape from the Empire. Flee from the barren land abandoned by the grace of God, and come to the glorious land with a bright future.」

The familiar words entered the ears of the priests. The female priest holding a Luminous Sprite opened wide.

「...Fauli 1:2. The Sacred Duty God gave the prophet Fauli...!」

「That’s right, the Grand Escape.」

Deacon Gutan nodded sagely and spread his arms out.

「Ten, or maybe twenty thousand. Lead as many devotees of the Church of Aldera as possible and escape to Kioka— this is the Sacred Duty given to you.」

This was a grand accomplishment described in the bible. The unexpected demand silenced everyone in the room.

「And of course, if you escape to our territory, I will guarantee you will be treated fairly. It had been a long while since the security between the Empire and Kioka had been heightened and the number of people who wanted to seek asylum has risen to the limits. You will lead them to Kioka— by following our plans. How about it? The chance of success is much higher than scheming a rebellion, right?」

The Deacon slowly curled the corners of his lips. A priest barely managed to squeeze out his voice.

「... You want us to betray the Empire and sell out the citizens to Kioka...?」

「No, it’s to save them. Lead the innocent masses away from the Empire that has no future and towards a bright land of hope. Is there a more noble Sacred Duty than that?」

When they realized it, the Deacon’s eyes were burning. One look into his eyes and anyone could tell that he had no intentions of scheming. He was a fanatic who believed in the Sacred Duty given by the Pope.

「As everyone here has realized, Ra Saia Alderamin has deserted the Empire, so you and the believers will have no future in this slowly sinking ship. The ranking clergy in the Empire is that Trisnai Izanma, so you will be toyed by that fox if you stay here — is that what you wish?」

The faces of the priests started to cramp as they all suppressed the urge to say the same thing. Wasn’t the Pope the one who gave that infamous Chancellor the position of Archbishop —?

「On the other hand, there aren’t enough Kioka citizens to develop the land on the eastern side of the continent. The devotees you bring will be sent to develop these lands with more than adequate support. Unlike the development plans of the Empire, those lands would be developed in an orderly fashion.

As for everyone here— you will be given a position in Ra Saia Alderamin that befits a person who fulfilled their Sacred Duty. A future that would be impossible for you in the Empire.」

Aside from the heavy responsibility of the Sacred Duty, Deacon Gutan proposed compensation that matched the risk. The clergies weren’t exactly saints, and he used a technique that made them waver from the religious and material viewpoints.

「There’s no point in hesitating. Everyone, show your faith. This is the only way to repay God.」

「「「「Warrrggghhh—!」」」」

Under the scorching sun that showed no signs of letting up, the energetic shouts of the Kioka sailors reverberated out loud.

There were men felling trees with axes, men carrying the felled trees aside, and people tying ropes to the stump and pulling with all their might. These were all forced labour for the prisoners and were by no means easy.

Ever since they were taken prisoner after their defeat near Port Nemong, they were forced to perform the hard labour of clearing the forest in the borders of the Empire's northern territories. It had been a long while since they last saw the ocean where they used to live.

「Hiee... W-We pulled it out...」「I'm beat... It's almost time for a rest.」

The soldiers who finally pulled out the tree stump after a long battle panted and complained.

「Still too early for that… On to the next one, boys.」

Marine Commander Greg Ayuzadori ordered his men with a mild tone. Labouring in a place far from home, away from the familiar scent of the sea, all that was grinding away at their body and soul.

At the same time— two soldiers watched their miserable figures from the shade some distance away.

「... Those prisoners looked exhausted.」

「Yes, but that's the labour expected of prisoners of war.」

The First Lieutenant supervising the work site answered the officer who bore the epaulette of a Lieutenant Colonel. They stood shoulder to shoulder and observed the scene with an awkward atmosphere between them.

「It's not good to give the prisoners an easy time, but this will affect progress tomorrow, right? … Look, someone is on the verge of passing out.」

「Yes～ but I'm assigning them work as per the orders from the higher ups...」

The First Lieutenant being questioned looked troubled. As the person in charge of managing the prisoners, he was just putting the prisoners to work on clearing the forest as ordered. But the Lieutenant Colonel thought differently, probably because he experienced being taken prisoners along with his subordinates before.

As he watched the prisoners covered in dust stagger around, the Lieutenant Colonel sighed deeply.

「... This is unbearable. Let them rest for today. They came from a place far colder than here, so the heat must be excruciating.」

「... As you wish, Lieutenant Colonel.」

「There's a need to adjust their daily workload too. It will be a waste to squeeze our labour force dry. And don't forget we have to guarantee their rights as prisoners.」

The First Lieutenant nodded with a complicated face as his superior officer sided with the prisoners.

「Hey～ It's over! That's it for today!」

When they heard the shouts of their comrade, the faces of the exhausted Kioka sailors started beaming.

「Great! Just like Commander Greg said!」

「Our efforts in pretending to be exhausted paid off!」

After checking the surroundings to make sure no one was watching, they sat on the ground and started chatting. It was obvious now that the sailors weren't as tired as that Lieutenant Colonel thought. They were only putting on an act to get an early break.

「I heard a ranking officer who spent some time as a prisoner of war is here for an inspection. Don't be too loud, they will see through our act if you are too energetic.」

Greg, who put on this show with his men, warned and then smiled. He was merciless in training his men but doing hard labour for the enemy was a different matter. Since working hard would benefit the enemy, they had to do shoddy work that barely passed muster.

「Be thankful to the Great Mother who gave us this intel. Since we finished up early today, I will go over for a visit. Any message you want me to bring along?」

「I want to see you soon!」 「Tell her our morale is still high!」 「Ahhh I miss you so much, Great Mother!」

The sailors shouted passionately. After getting the gist of their messages, Greg nodded before leaving with large strides.

「—That's how it is. Everyone of them kept clamouring for Great Mother, Great Mother, just like two years ago.」

After traveling by carriage for half a day from the work camp, Greg who was under watch the entire journey arrived at the facilities

where high ranking officers are imprisoned. The ones imprisoned here didn’t need to perform hard labour but was under tight surveillance.

「Sorry for letting you all wait for so long… I know that someone will fall ill after living as prisoners for so long.」

「Great Mother of White Wings」, Rear Admiral Elulufay Tenerexilla looked worried when she said that— Kioka 4th Naval Fleet was made up of minorities who had lost their home nations. She was the Admiral of this fleet and was known for her outstanding talent as a sailor and lovingly calling all her crew as her children. The feather shawl draped over her Kioka navy uniform and her beloved bird Misai were her unique trademark.

「Don’t worry. Be it on the battlefield or anywhere else, our job is to give it our all.」

「As the mother of you all, I would prefer if you all can focus on energy on things that give you a sense of accomplishment... Oh, my apologies, I don’t mean that our work here is useless. That mister over there, the forest they are clearing will be used to build accommodations for people, right? I at least understand the importance of clearing out the land.」

Elulufay explained to the Imperial soldier keeping watch over the meeting with a smile. Just one smile was enough to make him blush and avert his gaze. She is probably making things difficult for the guards all the time through such methods, Greg thought as the chair that was too small for him creaked.

「Speaking of which, there had not been any communications from our home country. There are probably internal squabbles, delaying the prisoner exchange. I hope they don’t forget about us.」

「There are movements. It will probably be soon.」

Elulufay told him confidently, which made Greg open his eyes wide.

「That man is not concerned about status or wealth, he is only stubborn about talent. He will not easily give up on a person he had laid his eyes on.」

The Great Mother of White Wings sighed, as if she were saying something that was tragic and pitiful.

「But if that was his deep love, it is too difficult to comprehend —」

Chapter 1: Grand Escape



In the heart of the Imperial Capital Banhataal lies the vast palace that was now the core of the government in both name and fact. On this day, a man was brought into the Deep Green Hall Courtyard.

「Ugghhh...!」

A man wearing priest robes of the Church of Aldera was escorted by two martial officers and forced to kneel on the red carpet. He was breaking out in cold sweat, worried he would be executed, and also because he couldn't stand the immense pressure of the monarch's gaze in front of him.

「This is the priest who attempt to cross the border without my permission?」

Empress Chamille Kitra Katjvanmaninik who sat on the throne in her black robes asked. The female knight standing beside her answered swiftly.

「He is Bishop Hardin Karufa, arrested after his scheme to escape fell through, and presented here on Your Majesty's request.」

「And the content of his scheme?」

Chamille asked, and the martial officer beside Bishop Karufa answered immediately.

「He refused to confess, so the details are unknown… But it's clear that the scheme involves a lot of people.」

Ohh～ the Empress mumbled after hearing that, turning her gaze towards the priest once again.

「The army's interrogation must be harsh, yet he refuse to give up the details?」

Bishop Karufa shivered as those golden eyes stared right at him. The Empress asked directly at the back of that man who had shrivelled into a ball.

「I don't like beating around the bush. I will get straight to the point, are you people attempting to revolt?」

At that, the Bishop shook his head violently. This was his way of expressing himself since he was not permitted to raise his head or even speak directly. Chamille grunted.

「No one would dare say 『Yes, I plan to revolt』... The fact is, I don't think you are planning to rebel. As a ruler, I know very well how much frustration has been accumulating amongst the followers of the church.」

She judged from the instinct of a ruler that she had honed over the past two years. How much had the citizen's unhappiness accumulated, when would it reach the breaking point — any ruler

would be sensitive to that breaking point. While Chamille was showing the stance of a tyrant, she was keeping watch over that part too.

「But it is also a fact that the devotees are growing uneasy with each passing day, so there would be people trying to use this opening to incite you — Be it Kioka or Ra Saia Alderamin.」

Bishop Karufa pursed his lips when he heard the Empress mention those names.

「I know you priests had been secretly keeping in contact with the Main Cathedral. I had been giving silent consent to that — so there would still be a diplomatic window open in case of an emergency. But recently, the communications between me and your group has been suspicious.」

「......!」

「I don't blame you for that.『That fellow』 is an Archbishop, and it's only natural for you to want to maintain distance from the government… However, it's regrettable if you think I intend to persecute the followers of Aldera. To undo this misunderstanding, I declare that during my reign, the Church of Aldera will remain the state religion, and you all will still be recognized members of the clergy.」

Chamille said with a slightly slowed pace and ordered the priest to raise his head. The Bishop timidly raised the upper half of his body

and saw the face of the Empress who was much calmer than he imagined.

「I understand that breaking off ties from the Main Cathedral will have a heavy burden on the daily work of the priests. First of all, graduates from the Seminary couldn't be inducted into priests. In that case, I will make a guarantee in place of the Main Cathedral. You would not need to seek permission from the Pope, and may form an independent organization in the Empire.」

Bishop Karufa opened his eyes in surprise, a ray of hope entered his face that was filled with fear and doubt. The Empress didn't overlook this change and continued.

「Do you think I'm just trying to buy time with these words? I have nothing to gain by antagonizing the Church of Aldera, when more than half the citizens follow the Church of Aldera. That would just be shooting myself in the feet.」

That was simply a fact. There were limits to her tyrannical reign. Those attempting to revolt or profiting from the nation without offering anything in return — the targets of her purges largely fall into these two categories. Just dealing with them was tiring enough, there was no way she would want to make more enemies without any reason.

「I'm not your enemy. After openly establishing that position, I will ask you once more — what are you scheming? More importantly,

what does the Main Cathedral want you to do?」

The Empress string of logical statements from the perspective of the ruler slightly lessened Bishop Karufa's fear. He couldn't continue to cower in fear now. The Bishop squirmed his stiff lips and answered the monarch.

「... We only have one wish, that is for the Empire to resume normal diplomatic relations with Ra Saia Alderamin.」

「That's not possible for the moment.」

「We understand... That's why we are so troubled. We don't know the right answer, or what action we should take that would befit our faith.」

Bishop Karufa stated the facts plainly. He had lost his way for a long time now, so it was difficult for him to mince his words.

「I don't know any information more in depth than what you have deduced thus far, Your Majesty. I wish to cross the border into the Grand Arfatra Mountains in order to seek directions for our future from the Main Cathedral. I have no intentions of following blindly, and hope to recover diplomatic relations through negotiations. The idea of the church being established independently as Your Majesty mentioned is one of the Trump Cards we have prepared...」

Bishop paused for a moment here, gulped, then continued.

「Pardon my impotence, please allow this prisoner to speak — if it is true that you don't intend to persecute the Church of Aldera, please share your views with the citizens post haste, with as many people as possible. No matter what the goals of the Main Cathedral may be... This will tie the Church followers to the Empire.」

There were tears in his eyes and his clenched fist was quivering. His stance was clearly saying that Bishop Karufa was ready for death the moment he spoke.

「...... I see.」

Seeing that the other party was serious, Chamille nodded slightly.

「Your advice has been noted. I will consider it, you are dismissed. You must be tired from your long journey, so rest before your next audience.」

The unexpected words of concern from the Empress made Bishop Karufa look at her with shock.

「May I ask what my punishment would be...?」

「What are you saying? I'm not someone who wants to lop off heads at a whim. I just want to speak with you all this while.」

Chamille said with a sigh, then looked sternly at the priest.

「There will be changes depending on future developments, but you will be in charge of contacting the other church followers from now on. The goal is the continued existence of the Church and the establishment of a new order. I will accept your proposal, do you have any objections?」

If what she said was true, then there was no contradiction with Bishop Karufa's position. It was his turn to determine the intent of the other party. Risking being punished for disrespecting the crown, he stared at the monarch before him.

「... Your Majesty, can I believe your words?」

「Decide for yourself. What are your eyes and ears for?」

Empress concluded with a stern question. The Bishop lowered his head frantically and fell silently into deep thought.

「I had an easy time today, Your Majesty.」

After Bishop Karufa left with the two martial officers, Captain Lucanti said to the Empress. Chamille showed an awkward smile.

「... Since you are the one saying it, that's not sarcasm. It's rare that no head had rolled today.」

「It might just be lopping one's head off, but it isn't simple to do it in one shot painlessly. And to be frank, I thought the priest would be executed and already braced myself.」

Lucanti stated casually that she was ready to kill just now. As expected of the captain of the Royal Guards, she was exceptional. The Empress shook her head with a sigh.

「It's my mistake for only focusing on putting down rebellion and not soothing the Church of Aldera in a timely fashion… And he didn't commit a crime for selfish reasons, and even gave me advice at the risk of death. It's illogical to execute moral citizens lightly. That is all.」

「So that's all there is to it. I'm happy to hear that.」

The female knight said with an innocent smile. The human named Chamille had not lost her senses, which made her happier than anything else.

「— With all that said, law and order is another matter. It would be too lenient to release you without any punishment.」

However— when the girl was about to relax, a voice instantly set her on edge. Chamille looked sharply at the entrance of the Grand Courtyard, her tone hostile.

「I don’t recall summoning you into the palace. Have you gone mad, fox?」

「Only a second rate vassal would come only on a summon. I will be by your side when Your Majesty really needs me.」

A man wearing Kiaki robes that symbolized his status as the top bureaucrat in the nation stood there with a crack of a smile on his face. Imperial Chancellor Trisnai Izanma, a man who used the many authority inherited from the previous regnant, a monster that was still lurking in the courts,

「But summoning that man here to question him is short sighted! I have always implored you to leave intel related duties to me. I just need a hundred men, and I can immediately find out the inner workings of the priests.」

「That doesn’t sound like an empty promise. But I can’t be certain how you will brainwash them in the process. As long as I sit on this throne, I won’t give you the chance to work in the dark.」

「It’s fine for Your Majesty to think that. But this is a practical problem, we have to uncover Ra Saia Alderamin’s schemes quickly. And to do that, we have to interrogate that priest with torture, find his accomplices and arrest them all, and then confirm what they heard in that secret meeting.」

The fox questioned the judgement of his monarch directly. That arrogance made the Empress roar with rage.

「You overstep your bounds, fox! No need for interrogations, I will get the intel from that person in good time! I just need him to understand that I have no intention of persecuting him!」

「You are missing the forest for the tree, Your Majesty. Both methods would yield the necessary information, but interrogation would get us results at least two days quicker.」

Trisnai stated the results of his simple calculation and continued.

「This is a war of intelligence. The key to victory is to grasp the situation swiftly, Empress Chamille. Now isn't the time to care about the life of one priest. For the stability of the nation, you have to steel your heart —」

「I refuse! It won't be acceptable for me unless you lose your head after that man is tortured!」

Empress refuted with a ferocity just short of charging at him, and the fox shrugged lightly.

「Since your mind is set, I won't say anything more… But do be aware of the time. If you take countermeasures too slowly, the Church followers might riot.」

「You don’t have to tell me that… Be gone if that is all, fox! Unless you want to test my patience!」

Not antagonising the Empress anymore, Trisnai bowed and then left leisurely. As his presence grew fainter, the Empress’ nails sunk into the armrest of the throne as she ground her teeth.

「... There is nothing more displeasing than this, Lucanti. That fox has a point.」

She had to take that into consideration now. No matter how much she hated Trisnai Izanma, she had to be impartial as a monarch— that was the discipline she imposed on herself.

「There is no merit in even discussing the point of interrogating a person I spared. However, I have to think of a way to make up for the delay because of this restriction… How can I obtain intelligence swiftly?」

She took a deep breath, closed her eyes in deep thought, then concluded.

「As expected— I can only rely on trustworthy people.」

The next morning, three soldiers walked shoulder to shoulder on the paved road towards the Deep Green Hall of the palace.

「...Sigh.」 「...Sigh...」

Brigadier General Senpa Sazarf and Major Matthew Tetzirich took turns sighing. Haro who was walking between them kept encouraging the two who were lethally lethargic.

「Both of you, don't look so depressed when we meet Her Majesty! Even the people who see you will get depressed! Get yourself together, even if you have to force yourself!」

「I know... But my heart feels heavy just imagining the loathsome work Her Majesty will be giving me again.」

「Me too, the general ranks that I'm not worthy of makes me tired... 」

「Really now! If you stay like this, Her Majesty will tell you off again! 」

Haro patted their backs and pinched their cheeks in an attempt to cheer them up. The group reached the Deep Green Hall as they chatted. Sazarf and Matthew stopped their sighing before the Empress. The subject before them prohibited them from acting that way.

A pair of golden eyes stared at the three people who had been granted audience.

「Thank you for coming— But, Haro, you are here too?」

Chamille mentioned the fact that someone she didn't summon was present. Haro stuck her tongue out casually.

「I followed them because I'm worried about leaving Matthew-san and Sazarf-san alone… Did I cause you any trouble?」

「No, it's fine. I will permit you to sit in, you need to know this too.
」

Empress didn't admonish her and got straight to the point after acknowledging her presence. She had always given special treatment to the 「Knights Corp」, but recently, Chamille had been especially lenient towards Haro.

Unlike her demands of exemplary military performance from Matthew and Torway, Chamille's expectation of Haro was to play the role of social lubricant with her steady personality. There was nothing to gain from robbing her leisure, so Chamille would usually keep an eyes close to her trivial transgression of etiquette.

「I summoned you here because there are suspicious movements amongst the devotees of the Aldera Church.」

The pudgy youth frowned. The distaste in his face made Chamille's chest ache.

「A-Another uprising...? If it’s the Church of Aldera, then it’s not soldiers or nobles, but commoners?」

「Calm down, Matthew, the situation hasn’t deteriorated that far, yet.」

She then continued without showing what her thoughts were. As the three of them seek an explanation with their gazes, the Empress answered personally.

「The Main Cathedral on the other side of the Grand Arfatra Mountains — messengers from Ra Saia Alderamin are inciting the devotees to do something. It’s only natural for the churches to remain in contact, but recently, high ranking priests of the ranks of Bishop are on the move. I suspect that they are scheming something.」

Understanding the concern of his monarch, Sazarf raised his hand and spoke.

「... Your Majesty, may I ask something? The diplomatic relations between us and Ra Saia Alderamin are still officially closed, but are the unofficial channels still shut?」

「We are pushing to resume ties, but the other party is adamant in their refusal. There is no way to probe them through that channel.」

The main Cathedral of the Aldera Church was working behind the scenes to keep diplomatic relations severed. After hearing the Empress' explanation, Sazarf realized once again how disturbing its presence was.

「To avoid any serious issues, I want to keep the Church followers in the Empire in check, and at the same time, find out what their plans are. That's why I'm assigning this task to you all.」

The Empress touched on the core of the issue. Matthew was surprised and asked in return.

「... So this is a secret reconnaissance?」

「That's one part of it. Further to that, I hope the act of sending a unit from Central would have an inhibitive effect.」

Sazarf supported his chin with his palm and peeked at his subordinate beside him.

「I will readily accept any decree… Pardon me for saying this, but are there experts in this field among us? Both Major Matthew and me trend towards open warfare in our experiences thus far, and might not be suited for a secret reconnaissance mission.」

Treating his question as an obvious concern, Chamille answered plainly.

「Even if I seek to dispatch the experts you speak of, almost all of them have been sent on espionage missions against Kioka, so it is difficult to gather the members to conduct a wide range investigation. That's why I ask for you — not experts in this field, but as people I trust.」

She emphasized on the last part. She obviously thought of them highly, and for the Empress, she couldn't emphasize this enough. Unwittingly deteriorating their relationship with vassals was a serious problem for any monarch. What she feared the most was losing the trust of the 「Knights Corp」, the last bastion of her relationships.

「......!」

Realizing her own fear, the girl bit her lips. It wasn't like this in the past — when the vermillion-haired girl was still alive. Despite hiding a deep secret, the members of the Knights Corp were friendly and warm. Surrounded by the warmth of old friends, the girl experienced the joy of a girl befitting her age.

Now that she was gone, how much weight did she have in their hearts? The girl realized this point whenever she brushed across the edge of the gaping hole in her soul.

「... I think you are suitable candidates too. I'm not asking you to be typical spies, it doesn't matter how you do it, just figure out what the Church followers' intentions are. I'm sure your experience conversing with the civilians in the Ebodolk Province and Yunakura province will

serve you well.」

Aside from her secret conversation with Ikuta in the palace, she didn’t have much chance to converse privately with the members of the Knights Corp. Drawing a clear line between master and vassal might sound good in theory, but their relationship had changed into one that could only happen through official summons— the warm human relationship of the past was now a cold and rigid hierarchical audience.

Chamille said with complicated feelings in her heart, and the slightly plump youth nodded slowly.

「... I’m not very confident, but I will accept this mission. Anyway, this is not a subjugation but the prevention of a rebellion, right? I will do what I can. If things go well, no one will die.」

「That’s right... But Matthew, you are detesting war even more now. As an officer with the future of the Empire on your shoulders, wouldn’t that be a problem?」

Merciless sarcasm spew out of the Empress’ mouth semi-automatically. It was only natural for Matthew to be adverse against ally casualties, but she put him down with an arrogant tone. This was the role of a tyrant that she was forcing herself to play.

Interpreting the Empress’ taunt literally, Matthew looked back at her with fiery eyes.

「I'm just tired of civil squabbles, I will be very motivated if I had to fight Kioka. Defending the citizens against foreign forces— that's the duty of a soldier after all.」

Ignoring Sazarf's gaze that was asking Matthew to restrain himself, he said that firmly. His words showed his displeasure towards the current situation, implying that 「you are the one who keeps ordering to fight wars that aren't in defence of the country.」

「—!」

Matthew's gaze was hostile and his words thorny, piercing Charmille's chest like a barbed spear. No one but her knew how intense that pain was— but she would never let it show.

Brushing it aside like water off a duck's back, the girl smiled tragically like usual.

「I'm glad to hear that— Brigadier General Sazarf, any objections?」

「... Well, I don't have any complaints with this job. I hate war after all.」

Sazarf was relieved that the series of interactions didn't create any mishap. He developed his bad masochistic habit during his time in the Northern Stronghold.

「—Question! May I take part in this mission?」

When the discussion was almost done, Haro who had been watching from the side suddenly spoke out. Chamille looked at her, a little surprised.

「You? Why—」

She wanted to ask Haro her intentions when she realized it — There was too short of a break since Matthew or Sazarf last set off on campaign. Instead of physical fatigue, they were probably more mentally exhausted from repeatedly taking part in battles they didn't want to fight. Matthew's reaction to sarcasm just now was worrying.

「... Let's see. Since Lieutenant Colonel Torway is occupied with training the troops, you will be an invaluable support for them. I will permit Major Haroma Becker to follow, can you lead a battalion?」

「Yes! Thank you for your kind offer, Your Majesty!」

Haro lowered her head with a brilliant smile. However — 「she」 didn't show her intentions that ran completely contrary to the Empress' assumptions.

Returning to base after the audience, the three of them immediately went to a meeting room to discuss their plans.

「The question right now is where and how do we go about our investigations.」

Matthew pointed out the root of the problem. Leaning back slightly on his chair, Sazarf fell into deep thought.

「Hmm... the devotee's activities are centred around the Cathedrals in the country. We should head there first, then investigate the surrounding villages.」

「It's difficult to balance between a show of force and secret reconnaissance. Aside from the unit advancing slowly in, we also need people to conceal their alignment with the military and investigate. These people will need disguises.」

「That's right. We need to gather lots of pilgrimage robes in the capital for our subordinates… I'm not sure how to go about this.」

They lacked experience in this type of mission, so their war meeting was proceeding slowly. They thought of getting the opinions of their subordinates or superiors, but due to the secret nature of the reconnaissance mission, they couldn't consult others.

Unwilling to let the meeting go awry if she remained silent, Haro shouted cheerfully.

「Alright! The priority should be detaining the priests, right? We have the list of important targets after all.」

Sensing her attempt to approach the meeting from a different angle, Matthew and Sazarf browsed the name list on hand.

「...Yes, that's right. If we find any priests on the list, we will immediately detain them for questioning. We will then decide whether to hold them with us, or let them roam free under our surveillance… It's possible that the other party is innocent, so doing so makes my heart heavy.」

「I feel the same, but I understand Her Majesty's concern. Don't underestimate the influence of the priest over their flock, there had been numerous rebellions instigated by them in the past.」

「That happened centuries ago. Back then, it was easy to get military power by colluding with one of the warring factions... But what about now? Even if the Church of Aldera tried to rebel, do you think there are any officers or units willing to assist them?」

Matthew raised the primary question. No matter how driven they were, the Church of Aldera alone couldn't start a revolution. First was the issue of weapons. The main weapons of the modern battlefield was the Wind Gun— if they couldn't gather enough of it, they would just be a farce of a combat unit. The manufacture and distribution of Wind Guns were restricted by law, so it would be difficult for the common man to even get the outdated smoothbore Wind Gun. If they wanted to get a large quantity of it, they would

need specialized channels.

「That’s hard to say... But after Her Majesty put down four rebellions splendidly and the leader of the extremist, Mitokazuruku, had just been executed in a brutal manner. Compared to when the Empress just took the throne, the factions resisting her ascent to power had been greatly diminished. If I am in their shoes, I will keep my head down.」

Matthew felt the same way too. Now was a bad time to start a revolt. It might be possible if a riot was started in concert with the uprising in the Fortress City Garurujan, but the way that uprising was crushed spread the brutal fame of Empress Chamille across the entire nation. It was difficult to imagine devotees who weren’t soldiers overcoming their fear to raise a flag of rebellion.

「However, there are officers who are really pious too. I see some familiar names on this list. So, this investigation even took that into account...」

Sazarf picked out the personnel he came into contact with during his time in the Northern Territories as he thought about it without much confidence. He suddenly raised his head, realizing that didn’t befit his status — It was different from two years ago, the dark-haired youth and vermillion-haired girl weren’t here, so things wouldn’t progress if he didn’t chair the meeting as the superior officer.

「— Sorry. Everyone can’t take action if I, the commander-in-chief, don't give clear directions. Let’s lay out the plan.

First, we will divide the personnel into two main categories, the unit openly wearing uniforms as part of the inspection party, and the search team in civilian or clergy attire to blend into the crowd. I will take command of the former, you two will direct the latter. My goal will be distracting them and keeping them in check, while you go for the actual objective」

Matthew and Haro nodded. Suppressing the urge to ask 「Is this enough?」, their superior officer reminded himself to speak as clearly as possible.

「First, we gather a large number of pilgrimage clothes and set off... This goes against protocols, but we will pay a visit to the local garrison after everything has been settled. Those units might have spies after all, and this is a secret reconnaissance. We will deal with it if a conflict might break out… No, I will handle that part.」

Sazarf changed his mind after some thought. His personality of giving up the initiative so readily even surprised himself.

「I understand! Then leave the pilgrimage clothes to me, in the meantime, please get ready to set off. It's quite a number, so you will have to wait for a while...」

Haro volunteered for the miscellaneous task. Sazarf was grateful for that, then added a point of concern after some thought.

「That can't be helped, but due to the nature of the mission, bulk ordering the clothes might be too blatant. The best way would be to

get our subordinates to wear casual attire and buy in small quantities through many different shops. That means shopping in all the tailor shop in the capital, do you have enough manpower for that?」

「It will be tedious, but I will find a way by activating the entire battalion! Oh, it will be better if I start early. May I get on with it?」

Haro left her seat before she even finished talking. Sazarf nodded to concur, and she saluted with a very brilliant smile.

「Well then, Major Haroma Becker will now set off to procure the supplies!」

She declared swiftly before turning and running out of the meeting room. Her energetic figure made the two men left behind sigh in awe.

「... We made her worried. I have to pull myself together.」

「Yes… That’s right.」

Matthew slapped his cheeks to perk himself up. He strictly reminded himself not to make meaningless complaints.

「—And so, today’s mission is to procure pilgrimage clothes. Time is short, so it will be tough!」

After giving the minimal explanation and telling them to keep things confidential, Haro's medic battalion changed into civilian wear before heading into the capital. Their destination was the hundreds of tailor shops spread out in the city.

「Try to act natural, and buy in small quantities from as many different shops as possible! It will be fine as long as it isn't too small! If it is too big, we can just tailor it down to size!」

「「「「「「「Yes Mdm!」」」」」」」

The details of what to do on scene had already been conveyed. The soldiers arrived in the capital in separate carriages and moved in teams of five.

「Mission starts! Please head to your assigned location in the capital, then gather here at 6pm in the evening! We don't have enough people, so I will be shopping too! It's fine for you to finish early, but I will be embarrassed if you are faster than me, so do take note of that!」

After hearing her subordinates burst out into laughter, Haro pushed them from behind.

「It's great that everyone is so lively! Let's go~!」

The Battalion Commanding Officer seemed more lively than usual, but no one found that strange.

「Good— Let’s start from that shop.」

Haro’s team visited a small shop deep inside an alley.

「I will talk to the owner. It’s a small stall, so I will do a demonstration, everyone please wait outside for me.」

With that, she entered the dim shop alone. This was a place where you needed some courage to go inside alone, but Haro greeted cheerfully without hesitation.

「Excuse me～ I want to buy pilgrimage clothes, do you have any stock～?」

The shopkeeper smoking a pipe behind stood up. He seemed to be running this tailor shop alone since there wasn’t any other staff inside.

「...Oh, pilgrimage clothes, huh. I remember I kept some inside… What are the sizes, and how many do you need?」

「I want ten, 7 male 3 female. Average adult sizes for both. And also —」

She approached the owner bending over to check his stock from behind and whispered into his ears.

「— Central will be sending troops to keep watch on the Cathedral in the Northern Territory. They will set off three days later. Tell the priests inciting the masses to hurry and hide, Comrade Craig.」

「—?」

The shopkeeper turned around immediately. The man named Craig looked at the innocent smiling face in surprise.

「Y-You too…?」

「That’s right. But I have been sleeping soundly until recently～」

Haro yawned gently. Craig watched her every move closely.

「... You know my name and channels, but I don’t even know your face. We are both agents, but the levels are too far apart.」

「Maybe. But it’s not good to be interested in unnecessary things — it might lead to an early grave, you know?」

She said something that Haro never would. Craig gulped.

「... I will keep that in mind. In any case, I will take care of this matter. I will contact my contacts through pigeons and horses by today. But the army is setting off in three days, huh. I'm not sure if the priests can convince their flock —」

「That won't be a problem. After setting off, I will slow the speed of their movement.」

The woman promised easily. This time, Craig was dumbstruck.

「... You have infiltrated into the Imperial Army? Your standing is high enough to interfere with the advance of a large unit. Of all the comrades active here, there aren't many agents —」

He stopped mid-sentence, finally realizing the true identity of the person before him.

「—Could it be, you are—」

「Oh, one more thing.」

Leaning forth to stop him from finishing his sentence, the woman who had the same face as Haro pulled out a stack of paper and shoved it to him.

「As for the captured Navy Admiral, this is the plan I came up with to rescue them. I can't take part since I will be in the north, but even a monkey can carry them out. So get it done in your spare time while

you are on it.」

「Hey, what do you mean by spare time...」

「I will take these then, bye～」

She grabbed the clothes without waiting for an answer, leaving as if to say that she was done with him. Leaving the exasperated Craig behind, the woman jogged back to her subordinates and showed them her spoils.

「Sorry for the wait! I got ten pieces! Let's head to the next shop before it gets dark!」

They procured the required quantity by the second night, and by the time they distributed the clothes and got ready to set off, it was already the afternoon of the third day. She planned meticulously so they wouldn't set off any sooner or later, but she still lowered her head and apologized embarrassedly.

「My apologies, it took longer than expected to procure enough quantity. I might have been too cautious and bought too little at a time...」

「No, it's fine. There's no point in this type of operations if we don't move covertly.」

Sazarf who planned to leave sooner didn't blame her for that. He was erring on the safe side, and was more cautious for his first secret reconnaissance mission.

「I never thought I would ever wear pilgrimage clothes... How do I look, Haro? Like a pious follower of Aldera?」

Matthew tried on some clothes and asked for comments. Haro checked him out with a groan.

「... You look too buff? You will look more like a pilgrim if your face is thinner.」

「You really don't mince words. I have slimmed down a lot over the past two years...」

The youth mumbled unhappily after being called fat. Sazarf patted his shoulder with a wry smile and gave the last order before setting off.

「Avoid starting any fights, but this will still be a military campaign. As per yesterday's instructions, the unit will advance in small groups. After setting the destination, we will split into sub sections on the move. Even if we disguise ourselves, a large group showing up would still be too prominent.」

「Understood... We will split up for now. The infiltration unit will go first, it will be more natural for us to set off at different times. Who

will go first?」

「Oh, then let me take the lead! Be careful, both of you, see you at the Northern Territories!」

After nonchalantly getting the first slot to leave, she led her subordinates and left Central.

After heading 30 km northeast from the Central Stronghold, the sun had completely set, and Haro’s group's first day of marching ended. They had dinner and lodged in a village along the way. She laid on a bed that would creak when she turned and rested with her subordinates — that night.

「—Uwah～」

She opened her eyes as if she was woken by the moonlight, then left the house silently before entering the woods behind.

「Wow, the stars are so pretty —」

The rain an hour ago washed away the murkiness in the air, making the stars in the sky even brighter. Mesmerized by the countless stars above her, she suddenly said.

「— Those four over there, there’s no point in hiding. Come on out.
」

The presence of people turning stiff could be felt through the air. Shortly after, four people of mixed genders appeared silently from the woods.

「... Not just our position, but our numbers too? We underestimated you, Comrade Patrenshina.」

「hmm～ it's the opposite for me, I'm a little disappointed.」

Haro casually approached the man leading the group and suddenly grabbed his neck.

「Kyaa—?」

「What low standards. It would be too harsh to demand you ragtag agents to reach the standards of 『Shadow』, but you would need more than that to work under me, you know? And what's with that terrible game of hide and seek? You think this is a kid's games?」

Her fingers sunk deep into his neck and almost crushed his windpipe. She suddenly let go and push him down. The man fell on his butt and covered his mouth to stop himself from coughing. That woman —Patrenshina curled her lips seductively, watching him suppress his natural reaction with a red face.

「Good, at least you understand that this isn't a game. Sigh, never mind. You might be a bit incompetent, but I wasn't expecting much.

」

Right after saying that with a giggle, the smile disappeared from her face as she glared at the other three.

「However— don't get in my way. If you dare buzz around me, I will swat you down.」

Sensing unbridled seriousness behind her words the four of them straightened their backs on reflex. She would swat down any fly that bothers her — that was all that she was saying. But that's what makes it abnormal. It meant she could kill a human like swatting down a fly.

After that conversation, it was clear who was in charge. With the authority to command these four as she wished, Patrenshina leaned on a tree nearby and started thinking.

「Alright～ anyway, we have to slow down the other units～ it must not tarnish Haro's reputation too much, or trouble our side either. We have to rack our brains.」

After a few seconds, the woman suddenly clapped her hands.

「Oh right, let's aim for the common weakness of that fatty and beard stubble. You there, you know what their weakness is?」

「The common weakness of Major Matthew Tetzirich and Brigadier General Senpa Sazarf? N-No...」

The female agent didn't know the answer and fell silent. Patrenshina looked at her with condescending eyes.

「You don't know? Really now? Huh~ How dumb~ Isn't the answer obvious?」

She lamented the low standards of her subordinates again and stated the answer without giving them a chance to think.

「They are both nice people. So nice that it's a fatal flaw for soldiers.」

In the afternoon on the second day after setting off, Matthew saw that scene.

「— Hmm? What's that?」

They had not left the Empire's central region yet, so he was still wearing uniform and moving with a company of 200 soldiers. A group arguing around a few wagons appeared before him.

「The wagons can't move…? Oh, they are coming here.」

When they saw the uniform on the pudgy youth's group, they ran over elatedly. Before Matthew could enquire about what happened, the other party drowned him out.

「Are you soldiers? Please help us!」

「Uwah— C-Calm down, what happened?」

「I'm a lumberjack living nearby, my colleagues got hit by a falling tree. We want to send them to a clinic 20km away...」

The man paused at that and pointed at the horse that had collapsed onto the road.

「It's too hot, the horse suddenly collapsed…! We can't ferry the injured away now!」

Matthew leaned forth and looked at the carriage that the man pointed out. There were many casualties with bloodied bandages inside. The man pleaded with a pained look at Matthew who was furrowing his brows:

「Those people need immediate treatment. If we don't move them… Mr Soldier, please help us!」

Behind Matthew’s group, Sazarf’s unit also ran into unexpected troubles.

「This is troubling, the bridge has collapsed...」

The centre of the bridge had collapsed and got washed away by the river by the rising water level. A group of locals were gathered there performing repairs. Sazarf was hobbled right after setting off as he looked at the map in his hands.

「It will be a bother to go around. What should we do?」

If their numbers were few, they could cross with boats, but that would take too long with such a large group. When they saw Sazarf who was troubled by this problem, one of the locals approached him to chat.

「Mr soldier, do you want to cross the bridge? Then can you help us repair it? As you can see, we are short handed here.」

「Hmm... How long will the repairs take? If we help, can it be done by tomorrow or the day after?」

「That will depend on you. The bridge structure is simple, so the repairs will be faster with more people. If things goes smoothly, it might be passable tomorrow or the day after.」

The vague answer meant Sazarf had to make an awkward decision. Do they take the long way around, or help with the bridge repairs — he couldn’t decide which was the right call.

「Speaking of which... the repairs seems to be half done.」

Only a small portion in the centre had been completely washed away, the foundation at both sides of the river bank were already done. With some repairs and laying down some planks, it should be passable — Sazarf used his past work experience to decide on a course of action and turned to his men.

「It can’t be helped… Alright, we will help with the repairs. Bring out the tools!」

While the soldiers were delayed by unexpected events, in the eastern part of the northern territories, the priests who accepted Ra Saia Alderamin’s requests were trying to convince their flock.

「... That’s all I want to say. If you are willing… please entrust your fate to me.」

Inside a building with tightly shut windows. The influential people in various impoverished villages were gathered under one roof. After the priest explained the situation, he urged them to choose. The

group hung their heads with bitter faces.

「There is no future if we stay in the Empire… Even the Bishop is saying that?」

「I'm not saying that the country will fall soon… However, after losing your farms in your escape from the Kioka invasion, it will be hard for you to raise your status from being tenant farmers.」

The priest carefully chose his words to point out the cruel reality. With the fall of the old eastern territories, many of the residents who were living there had to abandon their lands and flee. In order to continue farming in a foreign place, they had to do so by being tenant farmers. However, most of their profits would be taken away as rent. The priest picked out people in such difficult situations and proposed escaping out of the country.

「You can own land in Kioka, and in the eastern side of the continent away from the Empire too. Staying far away from the warfront and focusing on tiling the land will be better for you. This might sound rude… but for everyone here who had been through much trials and tribulations, your situation can't get any worse.」

The Church of Aldera emphasized the spirit of charity, and the members of the church had always provided support for the impoverished people. Many of them only survived because of their aid, so the impoverished citizens were very supportive of them. In the villages where they kept visiting and provided support for their lives and preached their religion, the influence of the priests could no

longer be ignored.

「That is assuming we escape successfully out of the nation — right?
」

Even so, convincing the civilians was no easy task. They were trying to instigate the people who escaped here after abandoning their homes to flee from their country this time. In the tense air where it wouldn't be a surprise if the citizens roar with anger, the priest could feel sweat roll down his back as he pushed to persuade them.

「I will help you leave. I swear by God's name that I will not go back on my word. If this plan fails, my fate will be sealed too. Once we start, my fate will be tied to yours until the end.」

It wasn't enough to explain it with cons and benefits. In order to get a group to uproot their lives, he needed to appeal to their sense of duty. If he wanted the impoverished devotees before him to buy into the Grand Escape, the priest had to show that they could entrust their lives to him.

「Didn't you consider the possibility that someone here might snitch to the army?」

「I will deal with it when the time comes. That just means I'm still lacking as a priest.」

He had already braced himself for that possibility before coming here. The group was silent and still couldn’t dive completely into it, so the priest concluded his proposal.

「You may choose. But from the moment I proposed this, I’m already a traitor to the Empire. I hope everyone understands that I’m standing here with the determination to see this through.」

「......」

「Will you follow me into the future? Or stay here? If you have made your choice, tell me what you have decided —」

The priest urged them to answer. Before him, the devotees who had made their resolutions stared right back.

With no way of knowing that the situation was deteriorating with each passing moment, the progress of Matthew and the others were delayed out of control.

「Hey, this is different from what you said…! Isn’t it over after we help ferry the injured?」

The youth digging with a shovel yelled. A middle-aged man who was doing the same work beside him lowered his head in apology for the umpteenth time.

「Sorry sorry! As you can see, the landslide buried the entrance of the clinic, so it can't be used! If we don't clear the earth quickly...!」

Matthew couldn't help clicking his tongue. After sending the injured to their destination, another accident happened. Lives were at stakes here so they couldn't ignore it and got to work.

「...! We can't ignore this, but it's slowing us down, damn it!」

「— What, the bridge collapsed again?」

Sazarf was facing a series of problems too. They wanted to quickly repair the bridge and cross the river, but the construction would always stall before the final steps. The assembled parts of the bridge would collapse, and he was losing his patience.

「What's going on, this is the fourth time in two days! We are rushing to cross, don't waste time dragging out the construction time...!」

「I'm sorry～ there seems to be a mistake in the design plans～ we are amending it right now, it won't happen again, can you help us with the repairs for just a while longer?」

That local resident tried to keep the soldiers here with a wishy-washy attitude. Realizing that he couldn’t be trusted, Sazarf declared in a stern voice.

「This is the last time! If it collapse again, we will be taking a detour!」

＊

And of course, Matthew and Sazarf didn’t just happen to be unlucky. It was a tightly knitted plan to obstruct them, and in a sense, it was an 「attack」. They didn’t even realize that they had fallen into someone’s trap and were being toyed.

「Can we use more direct means?」

But contrary to the intentions of the mastermind, there were some amongst the trap setters who were eager to get results. When everyone was gathered in the abandoned building to report, one of the male agents proposed a more drastic report.

「...Hmm? That guy over there, what did you say?」

「Yes. Right now, the units are obstructing the progress of the army with indirect means as per your instructions, Patrenshina-san. Such as destroying bridges or arranging for the locals to delay them. We obtained results, but it feels like a roundabout way of doing things.」

Using such slow means doesn't suit my character. Knowing what that man was implying, the woman with Haro's face asked lazily.



「...Oh, is that so. I will humour you then, what do you want to do?」

「How about poisoning Major Matthew and Brigadier General Sazarf?」

The man didn't hesitate and stated the quickest method he could think of.

「This is a secret reconnaissance ordered under peace time, and their wariness is low on the way to the site. By adjusting the dosage, we can kill them or immobilize them. If you give the word, I will pretend to have food poisoning and get results by the end of the day —」

Before he could finish, the man's field of vision turned upside down.

「Are you an ——————————————————idiot?」

It took several seconds for the man to understand that he was held down onto the ground by his arm — excruciating pain shot up his shoulder with the realization of that.

「—Hyaa?」

「Poison the fatty and beard stubble? When they are in the midst of a secret mission under the Empress direct orders? Isn't that telling them 『you have a mole』? You don't understand one bit the reason I'm directing your activities.」

His joints were creaking. The part she was tormenting wasn't the bones or the muscles, but the pain receptacle nerves itself. This technique was different from martial arts meant to defeat the enemy, but a skill to mindbreak the target and bend them to your will.

「Haro and me are different from the worthless spies that can be found anywhere. Our mission is to infiltrate into the target area and continuously relay intel from the enemies core back until the strategic objective is achieved. So exposing my identity is out of the question, we can't let the enemy notice our presence. Do I really have to spell all this out～?」

The man was frothing at the mouth. He didn't scream out of his duty as an agent, but he couldn't do anything but grit his teeth. Excruciating pain that went beyond the limits tolerable by humans was assaulting him relentlessly.

「Also～ I almost fainted at the reckless thought of you killing an important figure of the enemy country based on your own judgement. If I want to kill them, I have all the chances in the world to do so— poison or assassination, it's that easy. Since there are no orders from the top, you should know that I'm intentionally letting them live.」

The woman skilfully adjusted the administration of pain as she kindly educated her immature subordinate. She literally made him painstakingly learn his mistake — outstanding lessons were always accompanied with pain, like tattooing on tender skin. That was the only method of teaching that she knew.

「In the first place, assassination is the worst method for an agent. Similar to the military, espionage missions are political in nature. People considered crucial for future diplomatic dealings should be protected adequately instead. Fatty and beard stubble belonged to that category, and they have a great relationship with Haro too. It's obvious that we have to be really careful in obstructing them.」

Patrenshina's white fingertips brushed a part of his wrist. Just that action made the man spasm uncontrollably. His eyes darted around, losing focus, and a wet patch spread in his groin.

「You get it? Etch that into your mind and never forget it? — This is the last time. You understand, right, if you speak nonsense again...」

The woman relaxed her grip on his wrist, then leaned to the man's ear and whispered.

「You will become an unwanted toy… I will break you apart and keep you tidily into a black box now.」

She explained in detail with a chilling voice and twisted his wrist slightly to the side. At that instant, the man felt intense pain one last

time — before he was liberated by passing out.

「Sorry, I got caught up with something along the way…! The investigations are ongoing, right?」

When Matthew arrived after running into all sorts of trouble, he was behind schedule. Haro who reached earlier didn't blame him and smiled with a nod.

「—Yes! I already sent people to check out the local 『Cathedral』 and surrounding villages. We found a few priests on the list and have put them under surveillance.」

「Instead of an interrogation, you elect to let the targets move freely for now? You are better suited for such a method… Alright, I will join the search too. Which zones haven't been searched yet?」

「Can you take care of the south as planned? I started my work from the north.」

「Understood! I will make up for the lost time!」

Matthew hit his fist onto his palm to perk himself up and charge out of the tent. Sending him off with her usual smile, she said to herself with satisfaction.

「Yes, that’s good… Run around energetically and waste your time!
」

Sazarf’s group arrived three days behind schedule. He entered the headquarter’s tent sheepishly, it was embarrassing, but the first thing out of his mouth was an apology.

「Sorry, my misjudgement caused the unit to arrive late… how’s the progress?」

When they heard the question, Matthew and Haro looked at each other with awkward faces.

「Other than the delay at the start of the operation, the investigation is going smoothly… But we haven’t found anything suspicious yet.」

「Same thing on my end. Aside from the priests under my surveillance, we also checked the movements of normal people, but we didn’t find unusual.」

In short, they had not gotten any concrete results yet. After confirming that, their superior officer scratched the back of his head.

「Is that so, guess it isn’t that simple… It would be for the best if it ends up being nothing, but...」

They could detect abnormalities, but not if everything was normal— that was the contradiction of an investigation mission. They were seeking clear results, but on the other hand, they were hoping that they wouldn’t uncover anything.

「In any case, I will be starting my investigations openly today. I will apply pressure to the entire territory, so the people who didn’t show any openings before might start acting differently. This is the main event now, so keep up your focus.」

「Yes!」「Yes～!」

His two subordinates answered, and Sazarf renewed his feelings towards the mission. However— their investigations would never yield any results. The important places and people that needed to be guarded had all been 「settled」 by her when she arrived ahead of time.

Matthew’s group who headed to the northeast would send periodical reports every two days to Chamille who was busy with her governing duties. However— after repeatedly receiving reports of 「no abnormality found」, the Empress started to worry if she was worried over nothing.

「... Am I worrying over nothing this time?」

「That would be great if true.」

Inside the Jade Green Hall Courtyard, Lucanti who was standing beside the throne said with a smile. Chamille nodded quietly.

「Yes, there's nothing more pleasing that outsmarting that fox—」

She had a moment of peace. The next instant— as if to mock this thought, a martial officer charged into the office.

「Your Majesty! Emergency report!」

「What is it!」

The Empress tensed up her relaxed expression and answered. The martial officer immediately said.

「Emergency message from Brigadier General Sazarf who left to keep watch over the Northern Territories came in just now! A large group of Church followers have gathered and are moving in the northeast direction!」

The report that deviated awkwardly from the worst scenario made Chamille frown.

「Migration… mass escape? How many of them are there?」

「A conservative estimate put them at over 15,000, maybe 20,000!」

This number robbed the last bit of optimism from the Empress' heart. The countermeasure she put in place had an effect— on the other hand, she couldn't wave away the doubt in her mind.

「... We sent inspectors over, but fail to uncover a scheme of this scale...?」

She couldn't understand that. She sent Matthew's group to the north to prevent this situation from developing. It was possible that their unfamiliarity with such missions prevented them performing. But… Even with that in mind, Chamille still couldn't accept that her forces allowed things to deteriorate this much without picking up any signs. Be it Matthew or Sazarf, she entrusted this mission to them because she had faith in their abilities.

「... How's the situation on scene, have we send out soldiers to pursue?」

「The unit noticed the movement and gave chase, but most of the church followers had fled into the Grand Arfatra Mountains… They plan to stop more followers from going, and sent units to lay ambush in the mountain paths.」

The stage had shifted from the barren lands of the Northern Territories and into the mountain range. Realizing that, Chamille

made up her mind and stood up from her throne.

「— Emergency mobilize the First Brigade and Torway's unit from the Central Military Stronghold. I will be going on a campaign.」

In the face of their decisive monarch, the troubled martial officers raised their opinions timidly.

「Your Majesty... B-But this isn't a civil unrest. It's a serious issue, but it should be fine to leave this to the local Military Stronghold.」

Their lingering naïve thinking made Chamille shook her head.

「After inciting such a serious problem, there is no way Kioka will remain idle. Their goal is to use the Church followers as lure and draw Matthew's group into the mountains. There are definitely traps there.」

She had to judge that to be so. Thinking back on the past war — how the war in the Northern territories developed, she couldn't take this lightly.

「War is looming. No— it has probably broken out locally.」

Chapter 2: The People Advancing Eastwards



How would you describe the feelings of the soldiers when they saw that scene?

The Empire's Northern Territory, east of the Grand Arfatra Mountains. The vegetation and terrain was different from barren waste to the north and east which served as the stage for the civil unrest last time. The altitude was lower, it was more humid, and there was lush greenery. The mountains on the Kioka side even had jungles scattered here and there, making the environment closer to that of the former eastern territories.

But if you looked up, the looming mountains that reached the clouds were just as imposing. It was clear even from so far away that the people scaling the treacherous mountains were moving slowly and helplessly. There were probably children, elderly, the injured and the sick. There would definitely be stragglers during their crossing of the mountains. Even so, they were still determined to take to the hills, leaving their home country that had been forsaken by the Gods.

「...This is insanity.」

The devotees abandoned the Empire where they were born and raised, to flee to a foreign nation.

That was the scene witnessed by all the soldiers under Brigadier General Senpa Sazarf's command.

「... Just from where we can see, there's four to five thousand people. If we include people in our blindspots, there are probably ten thousand of them.」

Standing on the plateau in front of his men, Matthew said as he looked through his telescope with vexation and frustration in his heart.

「Before reaching here, we stopped around 10,000 devotees behind us… Half of the group had made it into the mountains.」

Thump! Sazarf punched a tree trunk. He pursed his lips at his own incompetence.

「Why didn't we see the signs...? Just how off was our estimates?」

Standing beside the two of them with serious faces, the woman with Haro's face cast her eyes downwards.

「S-Sorry… i-it must be my fault. I missed a clue in my search area.」

Aside from it being intentionally, that was the truth. But Matthew and Sazarf never suspected that her personality had changed, and absolved her of fault because of their strong sense of responsibility.

「This situation can't be explained as a single person's mistake. All of us are probably at fault, or else things wouldn't be this bad.」

「I'm thinking the same thing too. But for things to turn out this way… I can't complain if Her Majesty takes my head.」

When he heard what Sazarf said, the pudgy youth shook his head with a serious face.

「Don't say that, Brigadier General. That's a bad joke.」

「Sorry, I only realized after saying that.」

Sazarf slapped his stiff face hard with both hands to perk himself up and looked ahead.

「We can't do anything about what happened. After advancing so far and stopping the people in our path, the problem now is what we should do with them.」

「It's a crime to leave the country without permission, we can't ignore that. Letting so many people escape might harm the trust and authority of the Empress. We have to bring as many people back as possible.」

「That's true— but should we venture deeper into the mountains to do so?」

The ominous tone in his superior officer's made Matthew frown.

「... I don't plan to make the same mistake as Lieutenant General Safida.」

「What a coincidence, me too. I have been taking care to defend the thin supply lines from guerrilla attacks… However, most of the Shinnack Tribe had moved out of the mountains, so I don't think they will just mimic the trick they played the last time.」

Sazarf analyzed calmly. The guerrilla attacks during the Northern Territory unrest was only possible for the local tribes familiar with the terrain, not something Kioka and the Aldera Holy Army could copy so easily. There were still survivors from the Shinnack Tribe living in the mountains, but they were just remnants of a fallen army. He didn't think they had the strength to rise up in rebellion once more.

「Despite all that, I'm all for not advancing — but if we just wave our handkerchief and just watch the 10,000 civilians leave, my earlier joke may turn into reality. To avoid making the same mistake as Lieutenant General Safida, we have to go forth.」

Sazarf turned around at that and surveyed the area.

「Set up the basecamp and field hospital in this plateau — Can I leave the frontline command to you, Major Matthew? I want your battalion to take point.」

The youth called out by name didn't answer immediately and replied with a stern face.

「... Kioka and Ra Saia Alderamin are probably behind this dramatic escape. If they are luring us in with the church followers, then there would be an intense battle during the pursuit.」

「Yes, that's probably true.」

「Repel the attackers and bring as many church followers back to the Empire as possible. Can I assume that is my mission?」

Seeing his superior officer nodding firmly, Matthew who had made this final confirmation straightened his back and saluted.

「Orders received— Haro, I will leave rear support to you, do your best.」

「Matthew-san... Please be careful.」

Matthew nodded in response to his comrade's concern and left. The girl played the role of Haro perfectly, but she was sneering in her heart — Everything was going as she expected.

In the mountains some distance away from the Imperial army in hot pursuit. Aldera followers of all ages and genders were hurrying up the arduous mountain terrain that could no longer be called roads.

「Hah, hah, hah...!」

「Hubby, we can’t... if we don’t rest for a while, the children will...」

The mother couldn’t bear seeing their children panting with their hands on their knees and pleaded. Her husband walking in front shook his head firmly.

「We are not there yet, don’t stop moving! You saw just now, the pursuing Imperial army is in the mountains! They are faster than us, and will catch up if we dally...!」

After committing the crime of fleeing the country, they were being pursued by the hounds of the Imperial army from behind. They wouldn’t live to see tomorrow if they fail to escape their fangs — that might not be the facts, but that was what they believed.

「Once we reach there— the top of that mountain, we will rest. Can you hang on until then?」

The man said and patted the backs of his children encouragingly. The eldest strode forth again, but the two younger ones cried even louder. The father grabbed his children’s arms in frustration.

「Pull yourself together...! Here, grab my hand!」

Even though he was saying that, it was hard to walk when he grabbed their arms. In the end, he carried his two children on his back. With the body weight of the two children resting heavily on him, the man struggled up the mountain slowly.

「Huff! Huff! Huff...! ...Uwah?」

Suddenly, the ground under his right feet turned into loose rocks. The man leaned sharply towards the cliff together with the children on his back.

「Hubby?」

His wife screamed. From what she could see, the father and two children were going to fall off the cliff — before tragedy struck, a strong arm grabbed onto them.

「— That was close. You did great getting here safely.」

「...Huh?」

The man was slowly laid down onto the rocky ground with his two children as he looked blankly at his saviour. A soldier wearing a uniform different from that of the Empire smiled gently at him.

「I’m Corporal Laval of the Kioka army, here to welcome you. We have prepared food, water and mules, so please take it easy from here.」

The man looked around when he heard that and found many Kioka soldiers aside from Corporal Laval had suddenly appeared, helping the others climbing up the mountains. He soothed his wife who rushed to him, telling her he was fine, and was shocked by the situation before him.

「W-Welcome up… this deep in the mountains?」

「Not just us, the apostles of God are here too.」

He looked at the direction pointed out by Corporal Laval and saw soldiers with the insignia of a single star working earnestly with the Kioka soldiers to provide aid to the church followers. The man opened his eyes wide at this scene.

「Ra Saia Alderamin Holy Army...!」

「Surprised? We are working with them to protect the followers of Aldera who wish to escape from the Empire. Since you have made it

here, you don't have to worry anymore.」

The Corporal slowly helped the man to stand and told him that, then looked gently at the man's family.

「Your wife and kids must be tired. Those who can't walk please ride the mules, I will bring you to a camp nearby. But this place will soon turn into a battlefield, so we can't rest too long.」

「Y-Yes... Thank you, you are a big help...」

The man finally squeezed out an answer to the unexpectedly generous support. Beside him, the children were jostling to drink water from the Corporal's canteen.

「— There's more than 4,000 people so far? Mum*, the pacing isn't too bad.」

In front of the long lines of Aldera followers hiking up the mountains was the bases of the Kioka and Aldera Holy Army, Kioka sent 3,000 men while the Aldera Holy Army mobilized 2,000 soldiers, spread out along the escape routes of the migrants.

Inside the commander's tent, the commander of the Kioka forces, Major General Jean Arkinex received periodic reports from his subordinates with a cheerful smile.

「It will be around six thousand people in five days. Assuming the Imperial Army give chase, the rest of the civilians would be stopped by them.」

Adjutant Miara added cautiously. The next moment, a thick-faced voice in sharp contrast to her chipped in.

「The numbers had increased to something that the Empire couldn't ignore. With such a short period of planning, they actually gathered such a huge group — Oh right, Jean. What's 37 plus 61?」

「It's 98, Professor. A big factor is that the more impoverished someone is, the more they cling on to religion. The outflow of priests would directly lead to the outflow of Church followers. Breaking off ties with Ra Saia Alderamin was one factor, but failing to put in the effort to retain them was the lapse of the Empire. This is largely the Empire suffering the consequences of their own actions.」

「The priests chasing me around are having a hard time now, and had to abandon their homes and flee here. They will learn the hardship of being on the run now — 48 times 11?」

「528. You can use larger numbers, Professor.」

Jean answered instantly. Anarai marked a circle on scrap paper while nodding.

「Hmm, you got everything right so far. And you answer within two seconds, you got an amazing brain.」

Jean smiled at that compliment. In order to verify his brain partition for sleep hypothesis, the safest way was testing him. Miara beside him frowned— She didn't like the tests that were interjected into their daily routines.

「... Erm, Professor Anarai. We agree to you coming with us, but you are distracting Jean too much...」

「No, it's fine, Miara. Just two or three calculations won't have much effect on me.」

She wanted to remind the Professor that he had gone too far, but the subject Jean himself turned her down. Ignoring Miara who was seething unhappily, the white-haired officer chatted intimately with Anarai.

「
*Yah**
, speaking of which— I didn't expect you to follow us into the mountains. Even after scaling a mountain 3,000 m above sea level, you appear more energetic than the soldiers around you, Professor… Your legs are as strong as you say.」

「Of course. Unlike a certain someone, I sleep soundly every night～
」

The old man puffed up his thin chest and declared. His lack of decorum towards a high ranking officer pushed Miara towards her limits with each passing second.

「... Like I said! Please mind your attitude —」

「Professor—! Look here! Over here!」

Before Miara could finish, a man suddenly charged into the tent and drowned out her words. Jean and Anarai turned their gazes his way.

「What is it, Bajin—Hmm? That...!」

「I dug this out from the cliff wall to the west! This metal plate is obviously manmade, but it's not rusting...!」

Bajin handed over a palm sized metal plate excitedly. Jean leaned in curiously.

「
*Hum**
? Pardon me... this is an incredible object, but why are the two of you so worked up, Professor?」

「Do you even need to ask!? This might be an artifact from an ancient civilization!」

The old man’s face turned red like an excited kid. The white-haired officer tilted his head confusedly.

「Ancient civilization...? So it’s from an era before the 6 precursor nations of Kioka and the Katjvarna Empire existed?」

「Far more ancient than that. It’s at least 5,000 years old.」

Anarai stated an absurd number of years before looking up in a daze, as if he was looking at the sky beyond the tent ceiling.

「An ancient past which didn’t have any written records, there used to be a civilization far more advanced than ours. The people from that era created something that had survived until modern times, the Four Great Sprites— That’s the gist of my 『Super Ancient Civilization Theory』. And of course, it’s still just a theory at this point.」

Jean opened his eyes wide when he heard this astonishing theory.

「— The Sprites? Made by man? ... Sorry, Professor, I don’t quite get what you mean.」

「What’s wrong? You are not an especially pious follower of Aldera, and you blindly believe that God created the Sprites and sent them to the mortal world? Very well— I will clear your doubts! Listen, the Sprites are a unique existence in the natural world —」

Anarai used the chance to give a lesson to Jean. Unable to interject because of the mood, Miara could only watch from the side.

A hand suddenly patted her shrivelled shoulder.

「... Don't be depressed.」

「D-Don't scare me like that!」

Her colleague Taznyado Harrah stood beside her with a sympathetic face. The Kioka soldier who was the most burly of the unit calmly received the sarcastic venting by Miara and sighed.

「I didn't expect Jean to be so close to someone. But that can't be helped, since the Professor is like a toy box with a different surprise waiting when opened.」

「B-But...! Discussing those matters deviates from the responsibilities of a soldier!」

「Even if you think so… Can you say that to Jean's face? Look at how happy he looks.」

Harrah cast his gaze at the white-haired officer. Miara didn't need him to remind her that Jean was showing the face of a youth filled with curiosity towards the unknown. After seeing that, there was no way she could butt in.

「Like what you told me before, I have never seen Jean show such a face. Not once before the Professor showed up.」

「......」

「The Professor did the things we failed to do, and I have complicated feelings about that. That guy actually found joy outside of fulfilling his duties, and that’s probably a good thing. You feel the same, right?」

After a short hesitation, Miara nodded slightly. Harrah could empathize with her struggles, and as the eldest of them all, he chose to be sensible about it.

「It’s one thing if it gets in the way of our mission, if not, just watch quietly from the side. You might feel a little lonely— but don’t worry ～ if Jean treats you too coldly and only plays with the Professor, I will tell him off.」

「Mind your own business...!」

Miara pounded her fist on his chest, then left the tent with a beet red face. 「Again～」 Harrah sent her off with a wry smile, then mumbled as his expression sharpened.

「In any case, our trap is slowly falling in place— how would the Imperials act?」

Around 1,000 m above sea level, Matthew Tetzirich’s vanguard battalion halted their advance.

「Seventh and Eight Platoon leader step forth.」

The two officers stepped out of the tidy formation and walked forth. The slightly plump youth faced the two men and stared at the two platoons standing at the other end — the soldiers had taken off their uniform and put on plain white clothes. They didn’t look like imperial soldiers in their pilgrimage garbs.

「From here on, your two platoons will take point. I’m sure you already know this mission will be very trying.」

Matthew’s opening lines made the two officers nod tensely with bated breath. He laid out a map with both hands.

「Follow the route I set and charge up the mountain path as fast as you can. Try to close in onto the tailing elements of the escapees, and if possible, blend in with them. That’s the reason why I chose your platoons known for your speed.」

The officers listened carefully with tense faces to Matthew’s detailed tactical plan, not missing a single word. Seeing his old self in them,

the youth could keenly feel the passage of time.

「... We got here from an unorthodox path, but at least this isn't a civil war. If a battle breaks out, we will be up against the Kioka and Aldera Holy Army. Honestly, I'm relieved by that. I have enough of fighting our own people.」

Matthew said as he folded the map and put it away. With a clear enemy in mind, his face was full of life.

「Defeat the enemy and bring our people back, that's the only thing we have to do. It has been a while, so let's get on performing the actual duties of a soldier.」

「Reporting, OC (Officer Commanding) Sir! We have allowed passage to 621 refugees in the morning. They are moving to our rear right now!」

<
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Officer_commanding
>

This was a blockade set up on the devotees' escape route. The Kioka soldiers who were destined to clash with the Imperial Army in the near future tried to take in as many refugees before that moment

came.

「Hmm, good work. The customers are coming nonstop. It seems like the Empire isn’t a suitable place to live.」

「Of course. Compared to the Empire without a future, our Kioka has limitless potential. There’s also the fact that we treat the refugees we received well too.」

In a room Inside the fort made from lumber and earth. The commander of the 300 men garrison nodded the proud patriotic declaration made by his subordinate.

「What about the Imperial Army pursuers? The refugees today are the tail end of the group, Are they speeding up their advances?」

「No. A small unit probably out on surveillance had just reached a position two days away from here. They were beaten soundly in their last battle in the Northern Territories, so they probably don’t dare to venture too far out. The soonest we will clash with them would be three days later.」

「Hmm, three days, huh... We don’t have to worry about the battle harming the refugees.」

The OC was happy to set aside one of his worries, then turned to his subordinate with a serious face.

「I already said this many times— Treat the refugees well, Second Lieutenant. We need to hold the moral high ground in order to force the Empire to the brinks.」

「Yes Sir. Even though their Empress holds absolute authority in governance, their country will be doomed if the people abandon them. The country only exists because of the people, not because of the ruler… Isn't that right?」

The Second Lieutenant confirmed the ideology of his nation. His superior officer nodded with satisfaction at that — but his face turned bitter.

「That's right, this is a righteous battle. It will be better if the commander-in-chief isn't that brat...」

The Second Lieutenant was stunned by those words. His OC continued talking about this topic that shouldn't be discussed loudly.

「He was a junior officer not too long ago, and now he is the youngest Major General in Kioka history. He made use of the Prime Minister's backing and cockily overtook his seniors before him… What about you, can you lower your head to him without any grudge?」

The man asked with a stern glare at his subordinate. The Second Lieutenant checked around him before subtly shaking his head. His OC nodded keenly.

「It’s good that you understand. Take good care of the refugees and prepare for the battle three days later. Give a warm reception to the Imperial Army.」

「Yes, but there’s a problem, Major General Arkinex ordered us to thoroughly search the refugees...」

The Second Lieutenant said timidly. As expected, his superior officer furrowed his brows.

「He wants us to strip the refugees and trample the good will we built up? Sigh, having a brat who doesn't know the situation on the ground is a headache… Pretend you never got that instruction and treat the refugees in the same manner as always.」

「Y-Yes Sir....」

The Second Lieutenant saluted weakly before turning around and running out. At this moment, a messenger passed by him with a report.

「OC Sir, we have another 100 people up the mountains! The pursuing Imperial Army is right on their tails, this should be the last batch!」

「Don’t panic, Corporal Laval. Let’s keep it up until the last of them is in. This is the right way an army serving our nation should act —

correct?」

The man declared leisurely. He was confident that they were on a sure path to victory.

「— All units halt.」

In the morning three days later. Contrary to their expectations, the Kioka soldiers had already set up defences in a fort in the mountains in front of Matthew's battalion.

Observing the enemy terrain from behind cover of a slope, the pudgy youth muttered to himself.

「... They blocked the road with a blockade? It has been a while since I did this, looking up at the enemy who holds the high ground still feels as annoying as ever.」

This scene was close to a copy of the Northern Territories civil unrest. Enemy troops poked out the barrels of their guns through the gaps of their cover, waiting eagerly for a charge. Not just that, there were barrels of Wind Cannons protruding out from various positions, they were prepared for anything.

「The enemy numbered around 300. The ratio of Wind Gunners, Fire troops and Luminous soldiers is about 4:3:3. There aren't any Blast Cannons... That’s only natural, given the effort needed to transport them here. In their place, there are 8 Wind Cannons left behind from the Northern Territories civil unrest.」

The fire power might be less than a Blast Cannon, but the advantage of shooting downwards with gravity made them a big threat. Many of his comrades got their limbs crushed by the projectiles in the last war.

But— after taking all that into account, Matthew fixed his bayonet onto his Wind Gun with a click.

「Fix bayonets— We don’t have time to waste right at the start. Take them and that fort swiftly!」

「「「「「Sir, yes, Sir!」」」」」

His men answered his orders with high morale and determination — the battle then started.

「—They never learn. To attempt a frontal assault with just those numbers!?」

Sensing the enemy charging, the Kioka commander glared at them from the fort and prepared to engage.

「Engage, start shooting and fire the cannons! Don’t let them come near! — attack」

Bullets started flying on his orders. The sound of compressed air exploding overlapped with each other, sounding the musical prelude on the battlefield. Eight cannon shots rolled down the slope one beat slower, kicking up thick dust. One of the cannon shots tore down a tree.

「We are defending, but that doesn’t mean we have to be passive! We have the advantage of the high ground and terrain! Litter the corpses of the Imperials on top of the Grand Arfatra Mountains!」

Spurred by their commander, the Kioka soldiers continued their intense barrage. The Imperial soldiers who were charging turned back to the slope in the face of such resistance.

Silence fell between them and the enemy who was at a loss about how to attack, the battle had fallen into an impasse.

「— It’s one sided. They can’t even come near this fort.」

「That is a given since we have the advantage in terrain. I can’t even use this to bolster my war achievement.」

The commander was dumbstruck at their tactics that hadn’t grown since the Northern Territories unrest — It’s too dumb. Forcing an assault despite the disadvantageous situation would just be wasting

the lives of soldiers.

「But this will be a victory that befits Kioka. Defeating the enemy with the correct application of tactics, let that insomniac brat see the correct way of soldiering.」

On the other hand, defeating the foolish enemy with orthodox tactics satisfied his ego as a commander —He just needed to keep them in check, then beat them off with a salvo when they charged again. If the enemy didn't move, he just needed to maintain the status quo.

However— the next moment, the gloating commander received a stunning report.

「E-Enemy attack! They came from behind —!」

「What?」

The commander turned around in shock and saw a surprising scene — a large number of armed enemy soldiers was charging the fort from an unexpected direction.

「Impossible, why are there enemy soldiers behind the fort? I have men watching the area from a high vantage point, they couldn't have flanked us —」

As he was feeling utterly confused, he noticed one fact. The enemy attacking from the unexpected angle were wearing pilgrimage clothes similar to the Church followers.

「—Could it be, those refugees...」

The commander turned pale when he understood what happened. But it was too late, he already committed a fatal error before the battle began.

The fort was in disarray from the surprise attack and Matthew saw that this was his chance to strike.

「We have a pincer attack just as planned — charge!」

His battalion didn't miss this golden opportunity and launched a general attack. The Imperial soldiers charged up the slope with Wind Guns and crossbows. Sensing their approach, the Kioka soldiers engaged them in a panic.

「Don't relent from their retaliation, go all the way in! Don't waste this chance created by our allies!」

Matthew spurred his men with a shout and leapt into action. Because of their allies' attack to the rear of the fort, the density of the retaliatory fire dropped. It was no time to hesitate. If they don't break through the fort, their comrades who led the charge would be

overwhelmed.

「「「「「「Warrghhh —!!!」」」」」」

The soldiers sprint in a united front to take down the enemy fort. After several of them fell along the way, the leading elements finally reached the objective.

「— Reserves unit, engage them! Don't let them near the fort!」

The fort was desperately fighting back, attempting to resist the surprise attack with their reserve forces. But the enemy in pilgrimage garb didn't slow their offensive.

「They are charging while shooting at us! OC Sir, they are veteran hunter troops!」

「They move as one, but their individual movements are too damn fast! Damn it, I can't aim...!」

The enemy was better trained than expected, making the Kioka soldiers anxious. This was only natural, since the men under Matthew had improved a lot compared to the past. Suppressing fire, taking proper cover, letting others advance to a safe area — the soldiers divide their jobs according to their roles, moving as individual platoons while maintaining cohesion over the entire unit. Their threat couldn't be compared to soldiers in tight formation

charging up to fire in salvos.

Suddenly, the Kioka soldier who was fighting a tough battle saw an unexpected development. The enemy attacking the back of the fort formed into single file and charged right at the main gate.

「? T-Those guys are heading right for the main gate...!」

「Shots are ineffective! Stop them with melee combat.」

The soldiers moved forth to engage on that order. But they were too slow to stop the enemy's momentum. Before they could form a sturdy square formation, their ranks fell into disarray as the hunting troops charged them.

「The gate is open! Chargeeeeeeee!」

The sound of the door bar dropping echoed out. The blockade had fallen to the surprise attack from the rear, exposing its throat to the frontal assault unit. Finally linking up with their allies, the Imperial soldiers grouped up and ravaged the insides of the fort.

「Shyaa—!」 「Gwahh!」 「Ugghhh!」

The Kioka soldier stabbed by bayonets fell with blood spilling out of their mouths. They were too close to open fire and the battle devolved into close quarter combat. Matthew's unit was used to

chaotic fights and attacked ferociously.

「D-Damn it ahhhhh!」

One soldier charged in with reckless abandonment, slipping through the gaps by sheer dumb luck to close in on the commander. Seeing him from the corner of his eye, Matthew dodged the bayonet, grabbed his arm and knocked him down by sweeping the legs.

「Phew...!」

Matthew swiftly straddled the fallen soldier, stabbing his bayonet into the enemy soldier before pushing it further into his chest. Matthew only stood up when the enemy soldier was dead.

「Are you alright, Major Matthew!?」

「I'm fine… We have to suppress the fort quickly. Don't let their commander escape.」

Wiping the blood splatters from his face, the youth and his men started moving again. He broke through the four-leveled fort one by one and finally reached the remnants of the enemy at the rooftop.

「—You must be the commander.」

「Damn it… Shit...!」

Behind his subordinates with raised weapons, the enemy commander's lips were trembling from humiliation. When Matthew marked him out as the commander from his epaulette, the commander lashed out at the youth.

「What dirty tricks, disguising your soldiers with pilgrimage clothes to blend into the refugees from your own country! I won't accept this! Is this the righteous path of the Imperial Army!? Using your own citizens to carry out your schemes, don't you have any pride as soldiers!?」

「Before you say all that nonsense, lay down your arms and surrender… And you guys who kept inciting civil unrest in our country don't have the right to say all that. Enough, hurry up and raise your white flag.」

Matthew ignored his accusations and ordered his men to get ready for a volley fire. The officers turned pale when the muzzles were pointed at them, and one of them pulled out a white flag and waved it.

「W-Why you...!」

With that as a signal, the other soldiers laid down their weapons too, leaving just the OC by himself. Seeing how thick headed he was, Matthew sighed again.

「All this talk about pride and righteousness, those are luxuries you only bring up when you can spare the effort... For you, now isn't the time to revel in such ideals. When our unit is closing in, you should have played it safe and stop letting people through the fort. You didn't do so because you are proud and arrogant.」

「......Ugh...!」

「I just found a gap and went right in — all my battles require me to give it my all, I can't spare the effort to fight in a cool way.」

When he heard that, the enemy commander hung his head and dropped his crossbow. Matthew's men interpret this as the battle being over and immediately disarm the enemy. As he watched the enemy being disarmed and tied up, the pudgy youth asked his adjutant.

「Casualty report.」

「Yes Sir! The frontal assault unit has twelve dead, twenty-one heavily injured. The surprise attack force has seven dead and sixteen heavily injured. In total, nineteen dead and thirty-seven heavily injured! We are still counting the lightly wounded!」

「We lost nineteen men, huh… I can't do it like them.」

The black and red figures flashed across Matthew's mind. Even after accumulating lots of experience as an officer, he was still far from

their level. He apologized in his heart to his subordinates who died because of his lack of abilities, but he wasn't tied down by it, focusing on the next course of action instead.

「Get reinforcements from the unit behind us, apprehend the Church followers between here and the next blockade and send them to the back. We will continue our advance— don't let our victory get to your heads. Our enemy is Kioka, it might not be so easy next time.」

「— The first line of defence has fallen? That fast?」

The bad news were relayed to the rear through light communications in a matter of hours. The command post had a relaxed atmosphere because of Anarai who wasn't keen on the rules, but this report made them tense.

「Yes, it's unfortunate… According the soldiers who witnessed the scene on the grounds, we were hit by the main force coming from the front and a unit who went around to the back of the fort.」

The reporting officer added with a pained expression. The old sage imagined with a hand on his chin.

「A pincer attack in that terrain… That means the soldiers blended into the fleeing Church followers? I see, they made use of Kioka's openness towards the refugees.」

He concluded in a matter of seconds and nodded in awe. No matter how tense the air was, this Scientist had nothing to do with nervousness.

「Using such a bold strategy right from the start, the enemy commander sure got guts. In contrast, your subordinates are too careless. Seemingly ignoring your orders to thoroughly search the refugees.」

Anarai ignored the atmosphere and said with a taunt. The white-haired officer accepted his opinion with a serious face and slowly closed his eyes ― He could imagine the commander on the ground, and the OC who probably ignored his orders. He gave off such a vibe the moment they first met.

Subordinates who had been with him long term aside, those who just came under his command would often hold ill will towards him. This was a common problem for him, an officer who scaled quickly up the ranks at a young age. Making up the lack of trust was one of the problems he needed to resolve in the future.

「... Indeed. It is as the Professor says, we need to set our minds to deal with the issue.」

Jean opened his eyes a few seconds later, with the resolve to take the next steps in his silver eyes.

「I'm heading to the third line of defence. Miara, can you select an escort company?」

「Huh? You are leaving the command post? But Jean, a general ranked officer personally...」

Miara objected, worried about his safety. However, he closed one eye as if to tell her not to worry.

「I'm not heading to the frontlines, or interfere with the decisions on the ground at this point too. I want to be in a place where I can see the enemy positions, war can't be fought on paper after all.」

After saying that to sooth her, Jean quietly added.

「— There might be familiar faces in the enemy camp.」

「— Message from the frontlines, Major Haroma. We have broken through the first blockade and captured the enemy commander along with 200 odd fleeing citizens.」

「Really?」

The same report was sent to the Imperial Army's basecamp as great news. Looking in the direction where Matthew was, Sazarf showed a big smile.

「He is doing great against the Kioka army too. He has grown over the past two years.」

Haro smiled in agreement, and peeked in the opposite direction. Noticing her movements, Sazarf turned to her and asked.

「...? What's wrong, Major Haroma? Are you worried about the rear?」

「Oh… Well, I'm concern about the people our unit stopped on our way here.」

When he heard that, he took out his telescope and looked at the foot of the mountain. The subjects of Haro's concerns soon fell within his field of vision. He stiffened the corners of his lips.

「...That's true. We gave strict orders for them to disperse and go home, but a large group of them are still staying at the foot of the mountain. Even though it's useless for them to stay there.」

「I know, right? I'm worried about their provisions running out.」

The woman said the lines that matched Haroma Becker’s character perfectly. Sazarf didn’t notice anything wrong and started thinking as he kept his telescope.

「... True, they probably couldn’t bring themselves to retreat. The soldiers on site are trying to persuade them to no avail...」

He reached a natural conclusion. There was no way that he would realize that he was being led on.

「...Sorry, Major Haroma. I will take care of things here, can you turn back to persuade them? Your calm personality makes you a good candidate, it will be terrible if someone starves to death while we are busy engaging the enemy.」

Sazarf raised the best answer he thought he derived all by himself. The woman paused for a moment before answering, emphasizing that he was the one who proposed this, and she was just accepting his idea.

「—I understand. I will leave the field hospital here to my deputy for now, and take a platoon with me to the rear. Can you give me the authority to take command on site, as well as the authority to request assistance from the Northern Stronghold?」

「Hmm, wait a bit, I will write an official order.」

Mr goody-two-shoes superior immediately drafted out an order. The woman smiled gently as she watched him from behind.

「—Thank you.」

Sazarf never thought that he was giving a weapon called authority to someone he shouldn’t have.

Three days after the blockade fell. 26 km to the northeast of the basecamp, 3,200 m above sea level.

「— We finally get to see the terrain in its entirety.」

Major Matthew Tetzirich sat on a protruding boulder and laid out his map, focusing on the east. Specifically, the enemy positions that were scattered in his field of vision.

「E-Entirety... What do you mean?」

His adjutant who was afraid of heights asked as he stole glances at his feet. The pudgy youth turned the map he had marked to the other party.

「The route used by the Church followers, Kioka and Ra Saia Alderamin for this Grand Escape. We have predicted a few possible routes, and by working backwards from the enemy choke points, their main route is more or less confirmed.」

When he heard that, the adjutant stared intensely at the map. Matthew turned his eyes towards the mountain range.

「After going north up until there, they turned southeast. There are two hills they would need to cross along the way, and the blockades are set up in those two spots. A short distance after that would be a jungle. Traveling 20 km after the jungle would take us to Kioka territory.」

「... It's not going to be easy.」

「That's right. Considering the Church followers would be using the route, they should have chosen an easier path… However, that would run contrary to their defences against us. Allowing large groups of Imperial citizens into Kioka and grinding away the combat potential of the Imperial forces pursuing them when the chance arises — that's the enemy's strategy. And we are going along with them despite knowing all that.」

「But from this terrain, we will need to take down a fort from a disadvantageous position two more times. The surprise attack we used last time probably won't work again...」

The adjutant looked at Matthew with uneasy eyes. Matthew shook his head with a wry smile.

「It probably won’t come to that.」

「...Huh?」

「Just wait a while, and the enemy will withdraw from the fort in front. We just need to pass through directly after that.」

After hearing this unexpected prediction, the adjutant asked after going blank for a few seconds.

「What... What do you mean? The enemy finally got the upper hand, why would they willingly give up on their advantage...」

「They have to. If they don’t want to be isolated in the mountains.」

Matthew said firmly as if it was a sure thing. His adjutant finally realized why and looked to the east.

「...! The detachment unit is flanking to the enemy’s rear!」

「Correct. We are not just blindly chasing the Church followers from behind. There is more than one way into the mountains, so searching for a route to the enemy’s rear isn’t a stroke of genius, but something to be expected. Brigadier General Sazarf already sent out

a detachment unit right from the start without needing me to request for it.」

The youth explained plainly. The adjutant could see the aura of a veteran commander from the profile of his superior officer, and he seemed very reliable.

「There is still a problem. How are the enemy deployed on the mountains, which route should we take— all this information wasn't clear until recently… But after breaking through the first blockade, we got a good look at the enemy's formation earlier than expected, and can accurately determine where we need to flank and strike to cut off their frontlines from their rear. We just need to contact the detachment unit with light communication and horse messengers. Our allies standing by deep to the east of the mountains will choose the most suitable route to flank to the enemy's back.」

「Then, I will immediately message—」

「I already made the arrangements. That's why I'm here to observe the enemy's movements.」

While they were speaking, Matthew's eyes were facing the same direction so he wouldn't miss the tiniest change.

「I'm just being cautious in case the plan has to be used ahead of time, since this development is also within the enemy's expectations. They will be withdrawing from the blockades before it is too late. I predict they will withdraw within a week and set up a new defence in

the jungle… I'm thinking about attacking during their retreat.」

「Attack during their retreat?」

「Yes. Retreating with your backs to the enemy is far more difficult than advancing towards your foes. One misstep and the pursuers will seize the chance to widen the opening. Furthermore, the enemy is a mixed unit put together at a whim — this time, we can count on them on making a big mistake.」

And before noon of the next day, Matthew's prediction proved to be true.

「— Report.」

Jean calmly demanded the commander who fled in panic back to the command post after suffering a defeat. There wasn't any frustration or wavering in his silver eyes, just a hint of disappointment.

「T-They seized an opening during our retreat... The Imperial Army aimed for the ending moments of our retreat to launch their attack, when there were the fewest men left in the fort. We fought back desperately, but our coordination with the Aldera Holy Army was lacking, and we couldn't rally the troops...」

「After abandoning the bulk of your comrades and refugees, only your company escaped —isn't that true?」

「M-My apologies!」

The commander lowered his head in apology with tears in his eyes. Beside the white-haired officer in deep thought with a finger on his cheek, the old Scientist said without any reservation.

「Before discussing about strategy, there are too many lapses from the ground commander level. Some of your subordinates are too incompetent.」

「I can't refute that. Even after I kept telling them about the risks during retreats.」

Jean acknowledged that frankly. Miara who was standing beside him offered her opinion.

「Jean, leave this place to Harrah and me, please return to the command post. We won't repeat the same mistake. We will carry out the defensive battle and withdraw at an adequate timing.」

Miara said confidently. Those subordinates couldn't carry out the Insomniac Brilliant General's flawless strategic objectives— she was more anxious than anybody else with regards to their incompetence. Because she admired Jean Arkinex more than anybody else, she couldn't stand the mistakes of his subordinates being treated as his

mistake.

He could empathize with how Miara felt, but Jean shook his head.

「I don’t doubt what you said. However, the situation has now skewed too far from our original plan. Instead of stubbornly adhering to the plan, I think we should rework it completely.」

There wasn’t any hint of anxiousness in his face. Jean wouldn’t formulate a strategy that would fall apart from just one or two mistakes.

「And so— the soldiers in the third blockade will start to withdraw into the jungle in the hills. Miara, Harrah, you are in charge of the rear guard.」

「Huh— We are withdrawing? We haven’t even fought with the enemy yet.」

「

*Yah**

. Now it has come to this, we will mislead the enemy to be as arrogant as possible. Breaking through the third blockade without any losses, their advances are unstoppable— I want them to charge right into the jungle.」

Jean smiled boldly at the people around him, as if he finally got into the mood when the odds were stacked against him. His subordinates

couldn’t rest easy like him, so he continued in a tone as if he was teaching a child.

「Don’t think too much about it, it’s just changing the stage, with the jungle at the foot of the hill replacing the defensive battle that should have taken place in the three blockades. The results would be the same. The only thing that is the same is the Imperial Army suffering heavy casualties.」

Jean glanced at Anarai after saying that.
The climax will be coming next, look forward to that
ー he implied with his gaze.

「In any case, all units withdraw to the jungle. Everything will start from here.」

At the same time, Haro who used minimal psychological manipulation on Sazarf to get off the mountain saw the 10,000 odd Church followers gathered at the foot of the mountain.

「Grant us passage! Let us through!」 「We will starve to death in the Empire, so what’s wrong with fleeing out of the country!?」 「How can I leave my wife who left before ahead of me!?」 「I can’t stay in a nation abandoned by the gods!」 「I have enough! Enough

of fleeing from war or wandering around after losing my land...!」

The leading elements of the group kept scolding the Imperial Soldiers blocking their way. The soldiers raised their voice to urge them to go home, but the crowd showed no signs of dispersing, their stubbornness was stronger than expected.

「Compared to the last time I saw them, their numbers had not diminished at all...」

Haro looked at the Church followers as she chatted up the commander on the grounds. He saluted with a bitter smile.

「Sorry for failing to meet your expectations, Major Becker. We fired warning shots to disperse them, but to no effect...」

The man looked at the wall of people filling the entire field of vision and frowned.

「The priests within the group are still inciting the people. I thought about arresting the priests, but the Church followers are protecting them like human shields. At this point, we can only wait for them to tire themselves out...」

「I came back because I'm worried about this. Is anyone starving?」

「Not yet… The church followers brought provisions on their wagons, and held out longer than expected. They can get water from

the stream flowing there. It’s not very clean, but it can be purified with water sprites.」

「So they won’t go thirsty either? It’s better than them starving or getting thirsty, but they will hold out longer than expected.」

「Yes. When they run out of provision, they would have to give up… But I’m worried about them trying to break through by force. We have about a thousand men here, but even if the enemies aren’t armed, we can only fend off the assault of this mob by firing at them.」

The man expressed his worries as the ground commander. It’s only natural for the soldiers to be hesitant on shooting at their own citizens. Accurately sensing his feelings, the woman with Haro’s face showed a bright smile.

「It must be hard on you… Don’t worry, I already ask for reinforcements from a base nearby, 2,000 men will be here in a few days. With that many soldiers, the mob won’t be able to take forceful measures.」

「Thank you very much...! If it’s just a few days, we will manage somehow!」

The man seemed relieved from the bottom of his heart. Haro looked away from him and changed the topic.

「Even after securing food and water, there should still be the sick and wounded.」

「...Yes. The sun is strong, so many people have succumbed to heat stroke, mostly the elderly and children. They can mostly take care of themselves, but some come to us for aid.」

「Then I will get to work at the medical stations. Where is the tent housing the sick?」

At her request, the commander called for a soldier. After they led her to the tent in question, Haro started working as a medic.

「Don't worry, you will feel better soon!」

Just like what Haro used to do, she made her rounds seeing every person lying in the shade. Most of them are suffering from heat stroke, so there wasn't any need for complicated procedures. Let them drink water, wrap ice cubes made with water sprites and place them in the armpits of the serious cases. That was all to it.

「...Ughh......」

「Hmm? What's wrong?」

Seeing a patient lying in a corner of the tent wave at her, Haro walked over. He was saying something softly, and she gently leaned

in to listen.

「... Our comrades in the prison camp have started moving. Once their prison break is done, they will rush here immediately.」

After receiving the message without anyone overhearing, the woman moved away with a smile.

「It’s fine, you will get well soon! I will change the ice pack!」

Showing a face as if she just finished listening to a patient’s complaints, she smoothly continued with her nursing work as she schemed the next plot in her mind — at this moment, a voice from the tent’s entrance broke her train of thought.

「Major Becker, please come outside! The Empress is here!」

[redacted]

Starting from sea level 1,000 m, Matthew could sense an obvious difference in the taste of the air, and the dry sand was replaced with the constant smell of vegetation.

The ground was starting to get moist and the flora was getting dense. The sparse patches of grass could now be found everywhere, with trees so tall that you couldn’t see their top.

「......」

It was an environment he was not familiar with, but not completely foreign to him either. The slightly plump youth remembered the damp smell of vegetation and his surroundings were teeming with life. The other members of the Knights Corp were familiar with this too.

「... Stay on your guard. From here on, treat this as Kioka territory. 」

Matthew declared to the subordinates around him. There weren't any national borders, but the environment was enough to make it clear that this was foreign land. In the past, Matthew and his comrades drifted to the other side of the national border— he had seen and witnessed many things there, and all of that was too familiar with the scene before him.

「Even so, we have made full preparations. As the Major had predicted, we followed the retreating enemy straight through the two blockade without any significant losses.」

One subordinate said with full confidence. Matthew looked at that First Lieutenant with a stern gaze.

「Maybe it's the enemy's intention to make us cocky.」

「Is that so? But we are making good time after consecutive victories though.」

「Yes, consecutive victory while 『advancing forward』. Just as the enemy planned, we are deep into the mountains.」

Matthew hinted ominously which made the First Lieutenant show a face of anger. Unhappy with the optimism of his subordinate, the slightly plump youth noticed that the ground was no longer sloping downwards.

「— We are out of the hills. From here on, we will be entering the jungle.」

He shifted his eyes up from his feet, seeing the dense vegetation turned into a sea of trees. It was completely different from the dry woods in the Gagarukasakan Forest to the north of the mountains, this was a fertile land and the damp atmosphere of a jungle. The overlapping tree canopies were a shade of dark green very close to black. The vines intertwined between the trees blocked out the sun, making the forest even darker.

「The trees are denser than we thought. How should we proceed, Major?」

On the First Lieutenant's question, Matthew didn't give an immediate answer. He showed the most serious face in the entire campaign and glared at the ocean of trees ahead.

「... Unlike the Gagarukasakan Forest, this jungle doesn't have any mountain paths. It's too close to Kioka, so even the Shinnack don't dare approach this area… No, there must be a path, or else the Kioka and Church followers wouldn't be able to pass through.」

Matthew recalled the surrounding terrain from his memory, and gradually formulated a course of action.

「 We will meet up with the detachment unit at noon tomorrow. The forces behind will catch up with us too, and we will have around 5,000 men… Instead of searching tediously for a path, we should use our advantage in numbers to suppress them by sweeping through the entire foliage. Let the soldiers form ranks with some depth and march into the forest, paying attention to the surroundings and working together with each other, advancing slowly while being wary of enemy attack...」

After hearing that cautious textbook plan, a First Lieutenant furrowed his brows.

「Pardon me Major, but isn't that too passive? I know we should be careful, but this will take too much time. By the time we pass through the jungle, the Church followers and enemies would be long gone. Even if we have to take some risk, we should aim to break through quickly.」

The other officers nodded in agreement, as if to say that was obvious. Matthew felt a lump in his throat. He outranked these soldiers, but they were older and more experienced than him. For

Matthew who rose to the rank of Field officer at such a young age, the pressure of his older subordinates speaking out in consensus was overwhelming.

「... When you say risk, do you understand how much risk there is? We can't even imagine what tactics the enemy prepared for us in the dim jungle.」

「That's more the reason for us to break through as fast as possible. The less time we spend in the jungle, the less danger there is.」

「In that case, please leave command of the vanguard to me. I will take the shortest path to the other end of the forest and scout out the enemy.」

「In that case, please pick my unit for this mission! My men are fearless!」

Seeing the opinions falling on their side, the officers started giving their views. Matthew pinched the space between his brows and thought — it's true that they did have a point. They need to move fast, the slower they were, the more Church followers would leave for Kioka.

Matthew wanted to pass through the jungle quickly too. It's also true that they had to take risks to do so. So, he couldn't refute their opinions too forcefully.

「... I understand. We will send out three companies to scout for now. The three of you, command your own company and search the jungle.」

Seeing their younger superior officer retract his plan, the officers all smiled happily.

「— However!」

Looking at their faces that had a mixture of negative emotions, Matthew added sharply.

「If any of your units suffer serious casualties, we will do it my way, no matter how long it takes. I will not relent on that.」

His steadfast tone emphasized that he was in command. After a brief silence, the officers nodded reluctantly.

「... I can't stand that coward.」

The First Lieutenant bashed through the woods as he complained. His scout team entered the jungle, and he started venting to his deputy behind the back of his superior officer.

「That brat who got the backing of the Empress doesn't understand anything. The proper way of the army is not to avoid risk, but to manage risk. You can't win battles if you fear sacrifices. Aren't I right,

Sergeant Major?」

The subordinate who usually referred to him as 「that brat」 was filled with frustration, interpreting Matthew's caution as cowardice and criticizing him. His deputy who was listening to his rant thought differently from the First Lieutenant. After a brief hesitation, he stated his opinion.

「... You are right, but I can understand the Major's concern. This jungle… how do I put this, it's really dark. I can't shake off my ominous feelings.」

The deputy said as he surveyed the area. When he heard that, the First Lieutenant sighed loudly as if he just heard something pathetic.

「What kind of soldier is afraid of the dark! Time to go!」

The First Lieutenant said angrily and patted the back of his men. Urged on by him, the soldiers stepped slowly into the depth of the jungle.

On the other hand, a figure in a tree a long distance away was looking down at the group traveling in single file.

— Open fire?

One of the men holding a Wind Gun asked his comrade with a gaze, and got a negative response.

— They are scouts. Let them pass.

The leader concurred with this decision, and the figure withdrew his finger from the trigger. In the tense silence, the Imperial soldiers' defenceless backs passed right before them.

Before the reconnaissance teams returned, Matthew decided to use a trick he learned. With a large iron wok on his back, he left the basecamp with a few tools in his hands.

「Heave ho...」

He went to a corner of the campgrounds and set up the wok over one of the fire pits. He gathered dry sand and put it into the pot, then used a wooden spatula to stir and heat them up. When it had been equally heated, Matthew poured water from his canteen into a kettle before burying it into the sand.

「It's time to grind the beans.」

The pudgy youth grounded up black beans in a mortar while he checked the wok from time to time. He grounded carefully, taking

care to make them even, and soon, the sand in the wok was heated into the appropriate temperature. Seeing steam coming out from the kettle, he poured the grounded beans into a tall metal cup, then poured boiling water from the kettle into it.

「Woaahh...」

The liquid quickly welled up to the edge, and Matthew poured the top clear layer into a mug he had prepared ahead of time. He kept repeating the same thing, filling the surrounding with a complicated aroma. The soldiers drawn in by the sand looked over curiously.

<TL: Turkish coffee,
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gj7Nnn7ycho
>

「—Oh.」 「This smell is...」

There were a few officers too— Young junior officers walked over, captivated by the aroma. Without needing Matthew to say anything, they sat down around the iron wok.

「You brought beans again? Major, you really like drinking this.」

「This isn't anything special though.」

With a plain answer, Matthew gestured for his subordinates to pick up their filled mugs. They picked the mugs up and brought them to

their lips. For a moment, the place was filled with the sound of sipping.

「... Hmm. It taste better than last time.」

「It’s less bitter, and the taste is better.」

「Your technique is more refined now, you must have been practicing.」

His subordinates gave their feedback. Matthew snorted and said.

「... There might be trouble in the jungle.」

That changed the mood. As the group looked at him with serious eyes, the slightly plump youth continued.

「Specifically, they are aiming to divide us. When we spread out in the dark, they will take us out piece by piece… We must avoid that. All of you get ready too.」

The commander warned, bypassing the battalion commander and company captains, giving his message straight to the junior officers. Through chatting while having a drink, Matthew shared his thoughts which would normally be against regulations.

This was unorthodox, but for Matthew who was disliked by his direct subordinates such as the Captains and First Lieutenants, this was the groundwork he had to lay down to maintain control over his unit. With many junior officers having the tendencies to defy him, he had to do this to relay his intent to the ground level.

「... We will keep this in mind.」

The soldiers nodded and drank hot coffee along with their commander’s intent.

「—Major! Our three companies have returned without losing a single soldier!」

In the evening on that same day, the reconnaissance teams returned unscathed, contrary to Matthew’s expectations. Something seemed off, but the youth started investigating the intel brought back by the unit.

「... Let’s start off with the enemy base.」

「Yes Sir! The enemy set up camp 1 km to the east of the jungle, on top of a hill. They plan to engage us from the high grounds, but there aren’t any buildings like the previous forts, and the hill’s elevation is on the low side, so it’s just a temporary base. They number around 3,000, and the Church followers are on the other side... It seems most of the masses already made it to Kioka, we can only see around 3,000 of them.」

The First Lieutenant added to incite his superior. Matthew saw through his intention. If they successfully retrieve the 3,000 Church followers, they will reach the target number after adding the numbers they already sent back. They would have stopped the 「Grand Escape」 — he was implying that.

「This is the path we took through the jungle. The undulations are more obvious than we thought, so we couldn't make it from west to east directly, but we are confident this is the shortest route. For the whole unit, we can divide them into three files through the forest, so speed won't be an issue.」

Showing the map he had drawn, the First Lieutenant got more passionate as he spoke. He leaned in at his superior officer who was staring at the paper.

「Now isn't the time to hesitate, Major! While you are thinking about this, the citizens we should be protecting are getting taken away! If we don't hurry now, then when!?」

Matthew gulped. The risk would be the same, but the situation would worsen as time passes. The moment he acknowledged this fact, he had to agree to this.

「...I know, we will break through forcefully this time. To avoid getting picked off one by one the moment we step out of the jungle, all units will converge at a staging ground inside the jungle.」

These unexpected instructions made the First Lieutenant pout unhappily.

「This will affect our speed, it will take a lot of time to rally inside the jungle. It will be better to link up once we are out of the jungle. Or do you not trust our level of training?」

「This has nothing to do with trust. From the enemy's perspective, they will hit us the moment we poke our heads out of the jungle. Since we can think of that possibility, we have to take steps against it. Even if we need to exit the jungle one hour slower.」

Matthew looked back with fire in his eyes. After staring at each other for a few seconds, he ordered without looking away.

「Get the men ready— we move out at 3pm tomorrow.」

Some time before Matthew’s group struggles in the mountains.

「...Tch!」

He clicked his tongue— Even Greg was getting anxious.

Since their defeat on the seas near Port Nemong, most of the fleet were captured by the Empire, and they had been held prisoner for two years. He served his time while hoping to return home through diplomatic negotiations, but so much time had passed. The scent of the sea had long disappeared from his being, and his hand grew callus from his poor mimicking of a lumberjack, not the callus of a warrior.

He had an easier option. As a field-grade officer, he could request treatment that befitted a prisoner of his standings and stay away from manual labour just like his admiral, Elulufay. He would have an easier time if he chose that life.

Greg forsook that and sweated every day in order to keep up his troops’ morale and training level. The sailors free from the military hierarchy would turn dull, and two years was more than enough time for that to happen. Greg continued acting as their commander on foreign land so they wouldn’t lose the sense that they were a part of the Kioka fourth naval fleet.

「We might not be able to return if we just wait... Ugghh.」

After so much time has passed, even a dummy would realize that the prisoners' exchanges weren’t progressing. The Empire was reluctant to return the members of the fourth fleet — especially the very high ranking Elulufay, they could tell she was an irreplaceable talent. If Kioka couldn’t offer agreeable terms, the Empire was ready to keep them in this place indefinitely.

「I won’t— let you!」

After considering all that, Greg made up his mind. He couldn’t stand his respected 「Great Mother of White Wings」 and the subordinates he nurtured staying imprisoned any longer. The risk was huge, but he had to attempt a prison break.

He shared his thoughts with Elulufay. She was still waiting for a message from Kioka, but wasn’t against Greg’s decision. If there was an opportunity with a plan that had a high probability of success, she wouldn’t hesitate to escape.

Indeed— A plan and an opportunity. The crucial parts that Greg had to figure out.

And of course, their imprisoned environment didn’t give them any chances. All the prisoners were disarmed, and they had to apply one by one to meet with their partner sprite to prevent riots. They wouldn’t even allow the prisoners to gather. A guard was always stationed inside the prison, and they were always exerting pressure

to the prisoners serving manual labour, as if to imply —
there is always someone watching, don't try anything stupid.

Planning in such an environment would require him to secure a way to communicate with his subordinates. He had some success in that regard. There were plenty of ways and Greg was good with such petty tricks. After confirming the plan, he could get the two thousand odd prisoners in the prison camp to riot at the same time.

「The problem is, we will be done for if we did that...」

Greg sighed as he muttered to himself. The first problem was the armed battalion keeping watch over them. His unarmed men would have a difficult time fighting those guards, and a bigger problem would be after that— when they break out of the prison camp. How could he feed his 2,000 men isolated in enemy territory? Greg and the others were not short on food because the Imperial Army sent provisions periodically.

If they head east in an attempt to cross the borders, they would starve midway. If they were lucky, they could rob a village along the way, but there was no guarantee that would happen. Greg didn't know where they were in the first place. It was too risky to wander around the sparsely populated frontier in the hopes of finding a village.

「If we suppress the unit here, we should be able to find a map...」

But the map might not bring them hope. Without exception, for the past two years, visitors to the prison camp came from the west— the opposite direction of their beautiful home country. This was a hint that there weren't any villages close to the east.

How about betting it all by heading to the west where the supply carriages came from? … It's obvious there would be a military facility that way, and all would be lost if a patrol found them. They might get some food along the way, but it would be all over when their pursuers caught up. They didn't have the strength to fight the pursuers and make a long distance escape.

No matter what move he made, he would be checkmated a few moves later. After confirming that again, Greg chopped a tree in frustration.

His mind was going around in circles— when a sharp caw of a bird interjected suddenly.

「—Caw.」

Birds cawing in the woods weren't uncommon. But it was a different matter if it kept repeating in a fixed interval. Sensing it was a man made sound, Greg watched for anyone watching him as he walked towards the direction where the bird caw came from.

「...Oh.」

There wasn't anyone around, and the cawing stopped. But a paper that had been folded twice was pasted prominently on a tree. Greg swiftly took down the note and checked its content.

「They kept me waiting, huh.」

He grinned from ear to ear as he squatted down and carefully dug the dirt by the tree. He touched something hard and grabbed it without any hesitation.

It was a small vial filled with a viscous liquid.

「—Heh! How heinous.」

After lying low for two years— a path to break out appeared before him.

A battalion of 600 was garrisoned in the prison camp to keep watch over the 2,000 prisoners. It was a relatively large number. For a prison camp of this scale, one half or a third of these personnel would be enough.

But this was only natural given the geographic conditions. The Empire historically set up such facilities in the northern region. One of the reasons is the abundant uncleared grounds, so there was no shortage of manual labour work. The barren terrain also stripped the prisoners' will to flee.

There were no flaws in the prison camp's structure itself, with 5 m tall stone walls surrounding the prisoner's residential zone. The inside was divided into zones with stone walls and wooden fence, physically separating the prisoners to make any coordination between them difficult. In such an environment, Greg had to spend more than a year to set up a communication network with his subordinates.

The stone walls around the residential zone formed an equilateral triangle, each with its own surveillance post. There were Imperial guards posted there day and night, keeping watch at all times. It wouldn't be easy for even a few people to escape. First of all, the prison camp was designed to suppress 2,000 prisoners rioting at the same time. Any pitiful escapees would be shot once they charged out of the residential zone. Even if they were lucky enough to make it pass the lines of fire, they would die in the barren lands a few days later.

Even if all those countermeasures failed— Imperial reinforcements would arrive from a base 40 km away in a few hours. It was impossible for 2,000 people to lose their pursuers in the open plains. No matter what happens, they had no future to speak of. This was the consensus of everyone with regards to breaking out of the prison camp.

「It's time. Good work.」

「Hmm, changing shifts? I'm going to take a nap.」

The guard on watch changed shift with his colleague and walked to his room as he stifled a yawn. They knew how sturdy the prison camp was and was letting their guards down a little, but not to the extent of showing any openings. Central frequently sent inspectors to check on them, and the reports were given directly to the Empress, which kept the guards on their toes. They had learned how terrible the punishment awaits those who take their duties lightly. No one wanted to lose their head.

「Rejoice. We got our plan.」

Under conditions that were harsh for the prisoners, Greg finished the day's manual labour and returned to their living quarters and announced boldly to his men. In the toilet that was in the blind spot of the guards, the eight soldiers with him held their breath.

「We got a way out? … So, what should we do?」

In response to that question, Greg slowly took out a vial and showed them. The liquid inside was very vicious, and didn't move when the vial was shaken.

「By using this.」

「What's that...?」

「Poison... No, a pathogen.」

The dangerous term their superior officer said made the soldiers tense. The scary looking Marine Commander continued.

「This is a special product from the 『Phantom Unit』. One small spoonful of this, and you will break out in rashes and a fever for at least three days. Don't mistake this for wine and drink this.」

Greg said with a grin. He acted as if he was familiar with the effects of the pathogen, but he had never handled it before. From the confidence he displayed, it was clear this man possessed guts and carefulness.

「Make the Imperial guards drink this and create a chance to break out… Is that the plan?」

「If that is possible, we won't be having such a hard time.」

Greg snorted. The prisoners couldn't poison the guards, since they were living apart.

「Then, what should we do?」

With a more fearsome grin, Greg announced to his confused men.

「You will be drinking it.」

The air froze. A few seconds of silence later, a few quick-witted ones slowly grasped what he meant.

「... Serious rashes and a fever… I see...」

「With these symptoms, they will suspect an epidemic… To avoid the spread of the disease, they can't keep the sick together with the other prisoners.」

Greg explained further to his excited men.

「There are places to quarantine the sick in this prison camp, so the sick bay will be used first. However, what happens if the sick bay can't take them all in? If the number of patients increased, can they handle it just by quarantining inside the prison camp...?」

「... They will probably send the patients outside before they infect the entire prison camp.」

Greg nodded when his subordinate stated his conclusion.

「That' one thing, another thing is... I can't say it yet, but brace yourselves. This plan is more vicious than anything your dumb brains can come up with.」

He couldn't conceal his fear and disgust. His subordinates had the same question at the sight of their superior's rarely seen reaction. Who gave him the poison and the plan? But the Phantom unit was

involved, so they were too afraid to ask...

「... This poison, no, pathogen, how many portions do we have? We can't get all 2,000 of us to fall ill.」

「I have 5 vials. One vial is enough for 20 people, so that will be 100 portions if with the standard dosage, more than sufficient. We don't need everyone to fall sick for real, as for the rest… You get it, right? Use your special skill.」

Sensing what their superior officer was implying, the soldiers smiled wryly at the same time.

「Malingering, huh… Calling it a special skill is regrettable.」

「That's right. This skill won't work on a certain commander, it's too scary.」

The soldiers answered jokingly. Greg grunted.

「Anyway, if about 100 people pass out from a fever and the others say they aren't feeling well, they will have to suspect an epidemic outbreak. The jailors will be forced to deal with work that is out of the ordinary… Basically, an opportunity will arise.」

The soldiers nodded. Their faces that had turned frail from the long prison life brightened up, like how they were during their times

sailing with the 「Great Mother of White Wings」.

「The Phantom Unit didn't just give us the plan and wash their hands clean, they also did several things to make things more convenient for us. This calls for a celebration — we will start the operation tonight. Gather 100 volunteers who are willing to risk their lives for the Great Mother… You will recover in a month after drinking this thing, but you will be ingesting something of unknown origins.」

「We will need to draw lots. Can I get the prize?」

「You officers and noncom will obviously draw the short straws like me. You guys have no time to squirm in the sick bay, use your brains instead of your brawns, got it!?」

<TL: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Non-commissioned_officer>

「「「「「「「Yes Sir!」」」」」」」

They accepted the mission with perfect salutes, then started working on their prison break.

It was 7pm when the first patient was admitted into the sick bay as the Army Doctor was having a late dinner. Because they were clearing the forest by cutting down the trees, injuries were common, and the sick bay was usually busy.

「Huh! —The symptoms this time? He collapsed with a fever?」

Shoving the remaining food into his mouth in a hurry, the doctor chewed as he walked to the person stretchered in. It was a male soldier in his early twenties. He was breaking out in rashes, was short on breath, and his chest rose intensely with every breath he took.

The army doctor placed a hand on his forehead — the high temperature made him open his eyes wide.

「What’s with this high fever...?」

He had never seen such a high fever in all his years. His calm feeling was gone as he asked the patient with a serious face.

「Hey! Can you hear me! Can you answer my question?」

「... Ugh... Ahh...」

「You don’t need to speak! Nod for yes, shake for no! I’m going to ask you some questions!」

The army doctor did a medical examination forcefully. Any recent injuries? Ate any strange food? Any serious illness in the past or hidden ailments — in response to these questions, the patient shook his head weakly. There were a few lies, but his pained expression wasn’t an act. His mind was hazy, ache all over and his throat had a burning pain — the man desperately endured these symptoms he

was experiencing for the first time in his life.

「... What’s going on...?」

After the examination, the army doctor couldn’t get a diagnosis from the information he obtained and stood stiffly in place. This was different from any illness he knew, and the symptoms were intense. Rashes all over, abnormally fast heart rate, even the vessels in his eyeballs were affected.

「Doctor! Another one collapsed!」

「—?」

Before he could understand the situation before him, the next patient was sent in. This was a prisoner living in a different zone from the first patient, but their symptoms were the same. The army doctor looked at the two very ill patients and clicked his tongue.

「What’s with tonight...! Anyway, get me some ice! They won’t make it if they keep burning up!」

The reason was unclear, so he had to deal with the symptoms for now. The army doctor locked eyes with his water sprite partner.

「Another five collapsed! We are bringing them in!」

He instinctively understood the moment he received this unnatural report — that this was just the beginning.

Before dawn, more than 30 patients were sent into the sickbay, and several times that number claimed to be unwell but showed no symptoms. It was clear that this was an unusual situation, the Imperial soldiers wanted to resolve the problem, but they couldn't even understand what was wrong.

「So— this is food poisoning, right? With that many people down with this symptoms, I can't think of any other reason.」

「We have checked the prisoner's meals for the past three days, and can't find anything conclusive. We burned everything that looked suspicious, but the number of patients still keep increasing.」

「We didn't cut off the source? Or maybe... the illness is transmitted from human to human.」

「You think this is an unknown infectious disease? Impossible, how can an epidemic break out here...!」

Inside a room within a guard post, the officers were perplexed by the reports. As they were discussing, another subordinate brought in new information.

「Report! We have relayed the situation to the allied base to the west, they responded that there are soldiers in that base showing

the same symptoms! The citizens in the nearby settlements also collapsed from a fever!」

「... So it’s not just us.」

「Unfortunately… There’s a strong possibility that this is an epidemic.」

「...! Anyone died?」

「It’s unconfirmed, but some of the infected has died.」

「On the contrary, any patient recovered? Or reports of an effective medicine?」

「Unconfirmed sources state that there are a few. First, the most prominent symptoms are sudden rashes and fever for three to five days. After that, the patients would claim they are cold. If they aren’t given blankets and medicine spice soup to warm up, the symptoms will worsen.」

「Keep them warm, huh… It’s basic, but it’s also the only effective treatment. Since we can’t determine the truth behind the disease, we have to use this method. Give the prisoners blankets.」

「Well... we don’t have enough.」

「What?」

「We don’t have enough to give to all the patients. The climate here is warm, so they can sleep without blankets. The prison camp has limited blankets. We don’t have enough right now, and there is a possibility of more patients in the future...」

「So we need to replenish our supplies?」

「Yes, and we need to do it fast. Someone might die after failing to keep warm after their fever.」

「... Alright. I will approve the budget, procure all the blankets from the neighbouring villages!」

However, given the climate here, blankets weren’t used here. That wouldn’t change even if they travelled a little further. The procurement team quickly learned that reality.

「...Blankets? No, we don’t sell that.」

「We have thick clothes though… Cold weather clothing is seldom sold here. You should give up on that.」

「We have patients in the village, we want blankets too! If the army is in a terrible state, then what should we do!? Damn it!」

They visited the four most populated villages and received similar answers. The soldiers could only stand in place helplessly when someone seized the chance to approach the troubled troopers.

「Mr Soldier… You seemed troubled, what can I do for you?」

A traveling peddler walked over as he rubbed his palms, and the soldiers explained their plight to him without any expectations. He clapped with a smile at that, then quickly took out a merchandise from his wagon.

「In that case, do you think this will help? This is a groundsheet for outdoor use. The grounds are rocky here, so a cushion needs to be laid when camping outside. It is soft, and can be used to cover the body.」

「Really? Let me see... Oh, this will do. How much is it, shopkeeper?」

「Well... It's rather expensive, but since this is a business with the Imperial Army, I will try to make it cheap… How about this much?」

「... Hmm, that's not cheap, but it isn't a blatant mark up either. Alright, we will take all the stocks you have.」

「Thank you for your patronage! We met here by chance today, but I hope to be in your care in the future.」

The traveling peddler curled the corners of his lips and thanked them with a bow. The Imperial soldiers didn't realize the true intention behind his smile.

The procurement team brought the blankets back and immediately gave them out to the patients who made it through the fever stage and were feeling cold. Almost a hundred people had collapsed from a fever now, and more than 500 claimed to be unwell. The prison camp couldn't keep up with their needs.

「Hey, the blanket is here! I will cover you guys up!」

「Ugh, ugghh...」

Inmates nursed the ill inmates. Due to a lack of manpower and the risk of the epidemic spreading, the prison camp had to permit this. The Imperial guards who feared the unknown disease were happy with the arrangement, so the prisoners were gradually given more freedom with time.

「... Hey... This is...」

The patients with blankets turned their body and said softly to his comrades tending to him. He quietly handed over the metal tools like small knives and hammer from the leather pockets in the blankets. These tools were hidden in the blankets by their accomplice outside.

His comrade took the tools with a nod and kept it on him, careful not to let the army doctor notice— with the increase in the number of

patients, more resources were needed to tend for them. Essential Items that appeared harmless were sent to the prison camp under the laxed inspection standards. These were necessary for their prison break.

「Recover your strength in the time being… The preparations are in progress, it won't be long before we take action.」

「... Yes...」

Despite the torment of abdomen ache and chills, the patient answered with a nod. The Imperial guards had not noticed the strong will in the eyes of the prisoners suffering from the unknown disease.

「Cutting off the supply line」 was a basic strategy in war, but when the fighting took place in the shadows, this strategy had to be adjusted. Instead of cutting off the supplies, they had to meddle with it instead. That was what the Kioka agents in the northern territories were doing.

And of course, laying their hands directly on the large unit garrisoned there was difficult. However, it was different once you changed your perspective. The Imperial guards were humans too, they needed food, clothing and other daily necessities. Tracing the supplier for these goods would lead one to the civilians. For a base situated near a main road, the production and consumption of goods was probably handled by the army in bulk, but that wasn't true for the prison camp situated in the outskirts of the Northern territories.

Between the army support personnel and civilians, it was clear which one was easier to deal with. So the agents set up a network with the civilians doing business with the army so they could meddle with these goods through channels when the time comes. By doing so, it was possible to poison the Imperial guards' supper.

However, that would deplete the trust of their clientele built up over time. One could only become a supplier for the army with this trust, so if you betray their trust just once, you wouldn't be able to repair the relations ever again. Considering the time and effort to build up the channel with these suppliers, the Kioka agents couldn't throw away this trust so easily. If these merchants lose their contact with the army, the agents would lose the means of meddling with the military.

This was an exception, since the target was the retrieval of a key personnel, Elulufay. For her sake, Kioka was ready to give up their precious channel to the military. That was why they achieved results beyond just sending blankets with hidden tools to their comrades.

Four days after the appearance of the mysterious disease, what the Imperial soldiers feared had happened. Instead of the other side of the wall, the first guard keeping watch over the prisoners had fallen ill.

「... It finally happened.」

The commander's face turned bitter as he said that — they already anticipated that when the possibility of this being an epidemic increased, but there wasn't much they could do. He already told his

men to avoid contact with the prisoners and took all possible precaution against an epidemic. However, one of their own still got infected.

「Have you checked their food?」

「... Yes. But we can’t find any definite reason.」

His subordinate added reluctantly. This overturned the sliver of hope that this was caused by food poisoning. Since there were patients from prisoners living in a different zone, the epidemic was no longer a suspicion, but the answer.

「... Empty a warehouse. Before the disease spread, we need to isolate the sick soldiers.」

「Yes, right away… But what should we tell the troops?」

「...... Don’t say anything for now. I don’t want them to get fazed.」

The commander answered after a brief thought. This was a reasonable decision from his perspective. Many of the soldiers probably couldn’t keep their cool if they heard a deadly infectious disease was spreading in the building they were in.

「But words of their colleague collapsing had already spread...」

The commander was troubled as he imagined the rumours spreading. He could only pray that nothing was added into the rumours — in this situation, the soldiers would compare themselves to the prisoners. His hope was too faint.

A few days later, Greg and the others inside the prison camp could clearly feel the atmosphere changed. The guards kept an obvious distance from the prisoners and the frequency of patrols had dropped.

Sensing things were going as planned, the fearsome Marine Commander felt fear and awe.

「Hmmp... Those guards think this is a dangerous infectious disease.」

「Yes. I think one of them got infected too. It's only natural to assume we spread the disease to them and for them to act that way.」

Between his subordinates lying with blankets on them, Greg chatted quietly with his comrades. With the official reason of tending to the ill, they slowly got away from the guards' surveillance, since the guards didn't want to come close either.

「The repellent effect is excellent. So a disease of unknown origins is that frightening?」

Greg knew that the disease tormenting his subordinates was not fatal. The note with the plan stated that the symptoms were prominent, but they would make a full recovery in half a month. So he would be fine even if he stayed in this room filled with patients.

In truth, this disease couldn't be transmitted from person to person, only those who ingest the poison would show symptoms. It was accurate to diagnose it as food poisoning — But the brilliance of this plan was misleading people into thinking it was a deadly epidemic.

Unlike the prisoners who took the poison willingly, it wasn't easy to poison the Imperial guards on watch. The food they ate came from a completely separate supply line, it was all cooked or boiled before being served, which would make the poison less potent.

But the agents wouldn't give up just from that. They poisoned the Imperial guards through a different means, by their utensils. The plates, bowls and spoons were dipped in the poison given to Greg's men, with the visible marks wiped clean before sending them in as part of the supplies. Inspections of the utensils were more relaxed than the food, and since they were consumables that broke easily, it was easy to smuggle them into the prison camp. They just needed to wait for someone unlucky to fall ill from using them.

The success rate was lower than ingesting the poison directly, but they needed just one infected for the plan to work. Their goal wasn't to render the Imperial guards powerless, but to trick them into thinking the disease tormenting the patients was infectious. Just this misunderstanding would drastically weaken the prison camp's management. Since the ones managing the camp were also human,

they wouldn't want to be infected by this unknown disease. The guards would then keep their distance from the prisoners, relaxing their watch over them.

「And now— our chance is coming soon.」

Because of the Imperial soldiers' fear, a dark shadow loomed over the prison camp. Under its cloak, the inmates sharpened their fangs and got ready to strike back.

「A brawl between the inmates」— the supervisor of the prison camp received this report during lunch, and the worried Imperial guards rushed in to put down the fighting. Lunch time, one of the few luxuries they had was interrupted, and the thought of stepping into an area contaminated with disease made them uneasy. There were few things more depressing than that.

「Damn it… It's all because of those guys.」 「Why can't they just lie down quietly.」

Two platoons of 80 soldiers grumbled as they stepped into the prison camp with bayonets affixed to their Wind Guns. Squabbles between inmates were not rare, but this was a big brawl. A zone with around 200 inmates was rioting, and a large force was needed to stop them.

「Make way make way! Move! Move!」 「Damn it! What's all this racket!?」

The soldiers went past the stone walls and chased the gawking prisoners away before the scene of an intense riot appeared before them. It happened during lunch, so food and utensils were sprawled everywhere.

Seeing this couldn't be settled with words, the platoon leader swiftly ordered his men to fire warning shots into the sky. The gunshots members of the military were familiar with made the prisoners stop from fear.

「Stop this nonsense and form up before your lodgings! Do it now!」

「Quickly! Don't blame me if you eat a bullet for dallying!」

The Imperial guards aimed their muzzles at the inmates, threatening them without advancing. No one tried to defy the guards, and the inmates suddenly turned docile. After watching them carefully, the guards sighed in relief, thinking the riot had ceased more easily than expected.

「Someone explain this! If you know the events that led to this, step forward!」

The inmates gave each other a look and one of the prisoners stepped forth before the Platoon leader shouted again. According to him, it was just a trivial matter during a meal. When soup was given out, one of the prisoners told off an inmate on lunch duty 「Don't put your hands on my food」. As the person giving out soup was also

tending to the sick, he grabbed the collar of the aggressor agitatedly. Their brawl dragged the others in, and things escalated quickly into a full out riot… There had been minor scuffles before this, and this incident served as the spark that unleashed all the pent-up frustration.

「... Ughh...」

After hearing the explanation, the guards couldn’t resolve the issue since the reason was the mysterious contagious diseases. They could beat up a few inmates, cut rations or confine them as a warning. He declared harsher punishment would be meted out if there was a repeat.

After settling the matter, the guards turned around as if they couldn’t stand this place any longer. The guards walked out the exit in two columns, towards a neighbouring zone covered by 3 m tall wooden fences. The prisoners who came to gawk lined the fences ––

「Do it.」

It happened right then. The wooden fence separating the soldiers and the prisoners fell at the same time, on top of the 80 soldiers. It happened too suddenly, and the Imperial guards squirmed like fish caught in a net –– and the inmates attacked them brutally.

「「「「「Warggghhh!」」」」」

Some whacked the soldiers attempting to crawl out with clubs, others jumped on the fence to crush them with their weight. The tactic was to stop the Imperial soldiers from using their Wind Guns. The close quarters attack took the guards by surprise and suppressed them one by one.

「W-What's going on? ...Uwah!」

「We got played like a damn fiddle! The inmates did something to the fence!」

「How's that possible! The fence is made from 20cm thick rubber tree poles! How can the unarmed inmates — Guaahh!」

To stop the inmates from breaking out, the metal utensils and axes for manual labour were strictly accounted for. For the guards who were adamant on not letting the prisoners get their hands on weapons, this was a big surprise.

「「「「「Warrrgghhh!」」」」」

The surprise attack, advantage in numbers and the neutralization of Wind Guns made the battle one sided. In less than ten minutes, the 80 soldiers were subdued, their weapons and sprites in the hands of the prisoners.

「Not too shabby.」

Acknowledging the results of their first move, Greg stood before his men with a wide grin. After getting their groove back as soldiers after two years, they turned to their gruesome faced superior officer.

「Borrow the clothes from these guys. Oh, and don’t leave them naked, they are our important hostages.」

「「「「Yes Sir!」」」」

The Kioka sailors answered energetically. They were no longer inmates as they tossed the unarmed guards into the cells and gave the uniform to some of the inmates. The guards were given prisoner garbs in exchange.

「Alright— two more rounds to go.」

Greg muttered as he looked to the northeast and northwest.

There were watchtowers spread around the prison camp to monitor the prisoners, and the standard procedure was to inform any abnormal situation from the watchtowers directly to the control base. And this was the right time for that, but —

「Tch... You guys...!」

At the same time, all the guards were being suppressed when the operation started. Because of the loopholes due to the epidemic, they used the smuggled tools to destroy the fence and sneak people

into the watchtower in the night. The guards caught off guard couldn’t even send a light message and got disarmed.

The Kioka sailors then used the captured Luminous Sprite to send a fake message to their base. If you don’t do as we say, we will kill your master — any sprite would give in under this threat.

The message they were forced to send was as follows:

「We have difficulty dealing with the situation with the forces on hand, please urgently send two platoons to the camp to reinforce.」

This message was sent to the northeast and northwest base. The officers in those two bases sent 80 soldiers each, a total of 160 soldiers and 4 platoons rushed to the camp — and all of them were ambushed by the Kioka sailors. The guards were hit in a similar way as the initial 80 soldiers. This was the third round.

「What’s going on!? The hell!」

Seeing that the reinforcements hadn’t returned, the Imperial commander went on scene and finally realized the abnormal situation. Sensing that the message from the watchtowers had been falsified, he sent a messenger to the western base immediately since the prisoners had seized the camp. That was his priority given the dire situation.

On the other hand, the Kioka sailors were finally reunited with their partner sprite locked away somewhere in the camp. Visitations

between prisoners and their sprites were guaranteed by war treaties, but they were not permitted to stay together to prevent the inmate from breaking out.

「Raku... sorry for the wait.」 「Let's go, Shim. To our homeland.」

The sailors received their partners happily. Some of them made a contract with the sprites at a tender age, so life without a sprite was like missing a sibling or an internal organ. They immerse themselves in the moment and forgot about their worries for a time.

「— Commander, a horse is sighted leaving the northwest base! A messenger to inform their allies!」

A sailor who was watching the situation outside from the watchtower reported with a sideway glance. 「I thought as much.」 Greg wasn't fazed and acknowledged with a nod.

「Will that be fine? We will have a hard time if they get reinforcements.」

「We can't capture the stables from our position. Don't worry, the guys outside will cover for us.」

「Outside... the agents who infiltrated the Empire? How would they stop a galloping horse?」

Greg sighed at his subordinate's question and poked his head with his fist.

「Use your head. The shortest route from here to the western base is fixed. They will probably set up an ambush along the way.」

That was what he said, but Greg could only imagine the details of what the agents would do. They said they would take care of that part, so he could only palm it off to them —— That was how their situation was.

「Forget about the messenger. Two platoons make 80, three times that would be 240. Adding the 40 guards in the camp, that would be 280 hostages. This is the crucial point.」

「Yes, we took all of their equipment. What's next?」

「We can only move out directly. We got ourselves some meat shields against bullets after all.」

Greg showed his most ferocious smile to the guards, whose position had been reversed. The Imperial guards shivered, realizing how they would be used.

「Commandant, the prisoners are out of the camp! O-Our captured comrades are walking in front of them...!」

「Ughh...!」

As expected, the Kioka sailors made the Imperial guards stand in front as they walked out of the prison camp. Projectiles should be pouring in at the inmates, but they couldn't do so because of their comrades being used as human shields. The Imperial guards grit their teeth and couldn't pull the trigger as the Kioka sailors walked out into the plains with cheers.

「— Don't run in front of the meat shields. Go pass the checkpoint and head west.」

Greg who was walking in the middle kept his head down as he directed his men. His assistant looked troubled about that order.

「... Head west? We have a better chance of finding villages with food in that direction, but we might get hit from both sides by the prison camp and the western base.」

「Why do you think I left our comrades behind in the camp? The prison camp guards can't abandon their duty. It would be a different matter if everyone fled, but they are still defending the place with around 400 guards. They probably thought that sending out a messenger is their minimal obligation. Sigh, but they will still send a small scouting team after us.」

「I see, so that's the plan…? What about the pursuers from the western base? I don't think we can deal with that with just hostages

alone.」

「Whatever. We will find a way.」

「By finding a way, you mean...」

「I mean who cares. This is a chance for the guy who drew this map to show his stuff— and you got one part wrong, it's not pursuit, but engage.」

「Huh...?」

His assistant stared with his eyes wide. Greg said nonchalantly.

「Didn't I tell you? We will be attacking the western base. Because we have to take back our beautiful Great Mother.」

At the same time, the soldiers in the twelfth base of the Northern territory had no idea about the abnormality tens of kilometres to their east, and carried on with their daily duties as usual. The place wasn't as peaceful after experiencing the Northern unrest, and there were some with special duties assigned to this base.

「～～～～」

Sergeant Seriu Monn who was climbing a five storey tower near the centre of the base with a hum was one of them. It was clear that she

enjoyed her job, and her reason was simple.

「Sorry for the intrusion. I'm Sergeant Monn. Rear Admiral Mdm, have you been well!?」

「Oh, it's Seriu? Please come in. I'm happy to see you.」

The door opened with a voice ushering her in. A woman with an exotic atmosphere was sitting under a warm lantern light on a rattan chair— the admiral of the Kioka fourth naval fleet Elulufay Tenerexilla received her with a smile.

That smile put Sergeant Monn at ease— that was her reason behind her happiness.

「I bought you a gift!」

Sergeant Monn quickly unraveled the package she brought on the table. She deeply admired this unique officer from an enemy nation.

「It smells nice. Is this… baked confectionery?」

「Please have some.」

「Let me try… Oh, what a pure and nice taste. This gentle sweet taste… millet sugar? I'm glad you didn't add too much spices.」

「I know, right? This taste of the food here is probably too strong for you, Mdm.」

「I'm not trying to be picky, but eating spicy food several days in a row is troubling. Thank you, Seriu, your snack put it at ease.」

Sergeant Monn blushed. Elulufay's every word and action filled her with warmth and captivated her.

「Actually, I bought a gift for Misai too, it's dried river fish.」

「Really? Thank you, it's been a while since I fed it any fish.」

Closing the book on her lap, Elulufay stood up from her rattan chair.

「I wish to bring your gift to meet it… May I?」

There was no way Sergeant Monn would say no, and she nodded.

Elulufay resided— no, was imprisoned in a five storey tower, with her room in the fourth storey. That might be the case, but the space between the floor and the ceiling was vast, so the actual height was closer to a building with twice the number of storeys.

This was meant to accommodate field-grade officers and above, with furniture and decorations that could rival a high class hotel. For someone living alone, the space was far too big. But on closer look, it

was clear the place was meant to keep her under house arrest. The five windows were barely big enough to fit an arm through, set in a place far higher than Elulufay's head. She couldn't see the surrounding areas, meant just to illuminate the place with light.

It was dim during the day, with the Luminous Sprite serving as the primary light source. She was treated better than the other inmates, but the situation of the 「Great Mother of White Wings」 still pained Sergeant Monn's heart. Because Elulufay Tenerexilla was a naval officer. A person who yearned for the sky and the ocean, the wide and vast world. Compared to her past, being confined to a dim room must be very cramped.

Even if she felt that way, Sergeant Monn couldn't do anything about it. She was a soldier of the Empire, while Elulufay was a Kioka officer. They were clearly on opposing sides.

「— Ugh, looks like it's going to rain. I hope you don't get wet.」

Elulufay said on their way to the roof. When Sergeant Monn first took on the job as the manager of this room, she didn't understand, but she did now. There was no doubt in the weather forecast of the 「Great Mother of White Wings」, even if she couldn't see the sky.

「Hi, everyone. Good work on your sentry duty. This might be the day when I escape, so keep your guards up.」

When they passed the corridor, Elulufay greeted the sentries warmly. The contents might be sarcastic, but there wasn't any ill will

with the way she said it. The sentries smiled awkwardly and watched her leave with respect in their hearts.

「Let me get the door.」

When the two of them reached a room at the top floor, Sergeant Monn took out a bunch of keys hanging on her waist. When she unlocked and opened the door, the breeze from inside caressed their faces.

「Misai!」

Before the doors were fully open, Elulufay ran to her bird. Caw～～ Misai responded with a sharp caw. The large falcon in the cage suffered a wing injury two years ago, which has now healed, and couldn't wait to soar in the sky for its mistress again.

「Sorry I couldn't visit yesterday, have Seriu's gift. It's been so long since you last had fish.」

Misai bit the fish she moved into the cage with gusto. The Imperial Army didn't know what to do with this beast at first, but as per the privilege accorded to captured high ranking enemy officers, Misai was given special treatment. Which was why it was kept in the same building as Elulufay.

「May I let it fly outside for a while, Seriu?」

「Of course. I will open the cage.」

Sergeant Monn moved to the side of the cage and opened the padlock. She was cautious when she first tried this, but has gotten used to it now. Because she knew that Misai would never harm her.

After leaving the cage, Misai flapped its wings and flew out of the window near the ceiling. She couldn't see it flying outside, but Elulufay still smiled happily as she imagined it in the air.

「As usual, it will be back in 30 minutes. Let's chat in the meantime, Seriu.」

「Okay!」

They nodded at each other and sat opposite each other on two chairs by the cage. Sergeant Monn really likes the 30 minutes before Misai finished its stroll in the sky. Elulufay would tell her all sorts of things. For someone who grew up in the northern territory of the Empire, the seafaring tales of a Kioka resident was very exciting.

「Hmm, it's going to rain.」

Elulufay said suddenly. A few seconds later, the sound of raindrops splattering on the roof reached them. Sergeant Monn looked at her in awe once again.

「You guessed right today too… You even know the conditions of the sky even though you are inside.」

「I’m only sensing the humidity in the air. It seldom rains here, so it’s easy to tell the signs of incoming rain. And this isn’t an enclosed room with the huge windows here.

Elulufay looked to the large window near the ceiling as she said that. She said it was big, but the largest window in the tower was only one metre long on all sides. However, it was 3 metre above the floor, and could only be used to let in light.

「Seriu, how is your mother’s illness?」

Sergeant Monn froze at the sudden question. After a few seconds of silence, she said with a vague smile.

「I received a letter yesterday… They couldn’t save her after all.」

This answer made Elulufay hang her head… When talking about a painful topic, she would look as sullen as the one speaking. That was one of the reasons why Sergeant Monn liked her.

「I see… You must be sad, Seriu.」

「... I’m not sure. She isn’t the kindest of mothers… Even though I don’t have any other kin now, I honestly don’t feel any different.」

Elulufay listened quietly to Sergeant Monn as she said slowly.

「After enlisting, I seldom went home, and wasn't welcomed when I did. It's embarrassing to say… My mother really didn't like me. My father married her with me in tow, but after that, he divorced her.」

She had a self mocking smile. Before her mother even passed, she already lost the joy of familial kinship.

「Because of various reasons, my step father also left our home… Sigh, what will they do with the monetary compensation if I died in battle? I heard it won't be paid out if the dead soldier has no kin, then I would have died for nothing.」

Sergeant Monn sighed heavily after that, and suddenly felt a gentle touch on her cheek.

「Ah, hey...」

「I was wrong… You have been sad all this time, Seriu.」

Elulufay stood up and embraced Sergeant Monn. She wrapped her feather shawl around Sergeant Monn's body, like a mother bird tending to its chick.

Sergeant Monn couldn't move in this unexpected warmth— shortly after, she heard the sound of strong flapping wings.

「— You are back, Misai. That was fast.」

Elulufay continued hugging her as the return of her beloved bird brought her joy. Sergeant Monn was starting to feel embarrassed when she turned to Misai— and tilted her head confusedly.

「... Hmm? There's something in its beak… A bundle of ropes?」

「It's fine, I asked Misai to bring this to me.」

Elulufay gently let go and walked to her bird to retrieve the ropes and walk around. Sergeant Monn could only stare dumbfoundedly.

「This place will do.. Just a simple knot… and done.」

She secured the ropes to the central column in the room tightly, nodding satisfactory at her work. Sergeant Monn couldn't stay silent anymore and asked timidly.

「... Rear Admiral Mdm, may I ask what are you doing?」

「Oh, just some preparation for my escape.」

Elulufay replied indifferently. Her attitude was so bold it sounded like a joke. Sergeant Monn asked dumbfoundedly.

「Hmm, erm— y-you are escaping?」

「It will be great if I don't have to escape, but seeing how they have a firm grasp on our weakpoint, I probably won't get to return just from waiting. My long vacation will end today.」

She stretched her back widely as she explained. After realizing this wasn't a joke, Sergeant Monn said with her face cramping.

「I-If you are serious… I have to stop you.」

「Then first, you need to point the gun on your back at me.」

Elulufay said to her frankly as she crossed her arms and looked up at the window 3 metres above. If she pushed Misai's cage over and stood on top, she would barely reach it with her height. Sensing that she was going to put her words into action, Sergeant Monn cried.

「Please, say it isn't so… tell me it's not true. Tell me you are joking as usual. It's not too late to pretend nothing happened. I don't want to point my gun at you...!」

「I don't want to force you to do that either. Because Seriu, you are a gentle child.」

Elulufay held the rope with her left hand, turned and reached out to her.

「So, come with me.」

「... Huh?」

「There’s nothing in the Empire to hold you back, right? Then come to Kioka. The country will welcome you, and I will take care of you over there.」

「T-That’s—」

「You think you can’t do it? Are you troubled by this sudden proposal? That is fine too. I’m not trying to force you to make a decision.」

Elulufay’s voice was filled with strength, unlike anything she heard before. The 「Great Mother of White Wings」 looked straight at the shocked Sergeant Monn, and continued steadfastly.

「I have decided to bring you back and escape from here, that’s the conclusion— isn’t it obvious? There’s a crying child before me. Since no one will hold her hand, then I will take her with me.」

Her eyes were filled with boundless love and kindness. Elulufay said the crucial phrase to her shivering beloved child.

「Come with me, Seriu. You have had enough sorrow. From today onwards, you won't need to cry.」

Tears flowed out of her eyes— Sergeant Monn finally realized that she was already convinced a long time ago.

Twenty minutes later. A sentry detected the abnormality and rang the alarm.

「—Rear Admiral Tenerexilla has escaped! Sergeant Monn is missing too!」

「What? Search for them quickly! They couldn't have gone far!」

Prisoners would escape if the conditions were right. That was obvious, but the situation made them panic. Because they weren't mentally prepared for Elulufay Tenerexilla's prison break, and let the danger of it happening slip from their minds. Her friendly actions and warm interactions slowly sapped away their wariness.

「Damn it! What's going on...?」 「Ahh… Why are we panicking so much...!」

This was the charm of the 「Great Mother of White Wings」. They didn't know how hard it was to keep their guard up while interacting with her for so long.

The soldier started their search without calming down, and faced another shocking situation. Alarm bells were ringing throughout the base.

「Alert, alert～! Unknown forces approaching from the east! They number over a thousand! All units to battle stations～!」

「— What!」

The soldiers turned pale and were dumbstruck. They were certain that a huge uproar was coming their way.

「—Okay. They shouldn't find us here.」

Greg muttered as he looked to the base in the distance from the middle of the barren land. His 1,600 men around him looked in the same direction.

「Is the Great Mother safe…? I'm worried. What if the enemy use her as a hostage against our attack…?」

「That's meaningless worries. The agents probably made the arrangements— most importantly, you still don't understand Elulufay Tenerexilla.」

Greg shrugged with a fearless smile. His face was devoid of worries, just like what he said.

「She’s a born charmer, not someone who can be confined by a prison of that standard. From what I know, the Rear Admiral surrendered to enemy hands for our sakes. It’s difficult to act harshly towards our unit since the commander is nearby. For the past two years, she has been watching over us.」

Ignoring the men who were tearing up after hearing that, the fierce looking Marine Commander kept staring in the direction of the base.

「Since we broke out, the shackles on the Rear Admiral are gone too— see, as expected. She’s here.」

Greg put down his telescope. Someone was galloping his way within his field of vision. The soldiers cheered— there was no mistake, the admiral wearing her signature feather shawl was spurring the horse forth. For some reason, there was a female Imperial soldier riding tandem behind her, but no one cared about that trivial detail.

「Hi, my sweet children! Has everyone been well!?」

「Great Mother!」「Welcome back, our『Great Mother of White Wings』!」「Sorry for the wait...!」

The sailors forgot about their hunger and fatigue for now as they welcomed the return of their beloved Great Mother. Elulufay embraced them one by one. After sharing the joy of reunion with about 20 people, she remembered the person behind who was hanging her head.

「Oh, I forgot about this important thing. Everyone, listen carefully— this is Seriu Monn, who took great care of me during my imprisonment. From this way forward, she will be one of us, please take good care of her.」

When they heard what Elulufay said, the sailors approached Sergeant Monn. She shirked away nervously, but sympathetic hands rested on her shoulders.

「So you got mesmerized by the Great Mother too.」「Girls are in her strike zone too.」「Sigh, relax. Since you were drawn here because of her, then you are pretty much a comrade of the Fourth Fleet.」

Most of the Kioka Fourth Naval Fleet lost their home in wars before enlisting. Their identities were the subordinates of the 「Great Mother of White Wings」, so the past of new recruits wasn't a problem. The ex-Imperial Sergeant Monn was welcomed naturally in this environment.

Elulufay glanced sideways at this scene with a smile as she walked to her adjutant who didn't ask for a hug.

「Alright, Greg. I know the gist of the plan, but what's the specifics?」

「Flank around to the south of the base and capture part of the facilities there. The defences should be weakened right now. It will

be great if you can confirm that, Mdm Rear Admiral.」

「Yes, I think the same. There seems to be a scuffle in the northern mountains, so a large number of personnel had been diverted from that base, leaving just a battalion of 600 men. With that number, they won’t be able to defend the entire base.」

She had been meticulous in her collation of intelligence, and Elulufay confirmed the reliability of this information. Greg’s mouth that was split right to his ear smirked.

「Their compromised defences include their provision warehouse… Just as planned, it’s terrifying how well the plan was going.」

Played like a damned fiddle. It was a scheme by an ally, but Greg couldn’t shake off the feelings of disgust. He was a soldier whose motto was to get things done himself, so he was reluctant to follow the plan of an unnamed individual whose face he didn’t even know.

Even so, the current situation was a godsend. Seeing the base before him as prey, the fearsome looking Marine Commander raised his right arm high.

「We finally got food and weapons. All of you, look sharp!」



Chapter 3: Rumble in the Jungle

Two hours after linking up with 1,200 soldiers from two other battalions that arrived by an alternate route, Matthew led the Imperial forces into the jungle.

Their field of vision was limited in the dense vegetation as no path had been paved ahead of time. Because of that, Matthew was certain that maintaining the command structure would be incredibly difficult in the jungle, which was half of the reason why he was hesitant about stepping into the jungle. It was impossible to lead the movements of his troops in the jungle like how he did on an open field. Under such conditions, the commander-in-chief couldn't do anything before they left the jungle. Actions on the ground would be entirely dependent on the Platoon leaders.

「Don't stop. Let's hurry through this damn jungle already.」

However, the company commanders and above were not too concerned. They assumed that the enemy wouldn't be able to fight in such a terrain, since they themselves couldn't do so. The assumption was ingrained deeply into them, and they believe the enemy to be the same too.

「Damn it, I can't see...」 「How long do we have to walk in the woods?」

As expected, less than 30 minutes after entering the jungle, communications between units were cut. This wasn't an abnormal situation, it's just inevitable that the groups couldn't keep the same

pace due to the physical constraints of forcing a large group into the ever changing terrains of the jungle. It might be possible if they make their formation tighter to match the terrain, but no one wanted to slow the unit down, and the information in front couldn't be perfectly transmitted to the back anyway. Hence, they decided it was better to spread their men out for now. They could just reorganize before leaving the jungle.

The consequences of their naïve attitude came two hours after entering the jungle.

The familiar sound of compressed air explosion erupted around them, followed by the screams of their allies. This could only mean one thing. The imperial soldiers got ready to engage after sensing the enemy attack.

「Don't panic, stay alert and continue advancing! These are just uncoordinated shots!」

The enemy struck first, but the commanders weren't fazed. Enemy shooting from behind tree trunks or from the top of trees were within expectations, but such unorthodox deployment meant the attack lacked any impact. The trees hiding the enemy would also become an obstacle for shooting, and also cover the Imperials too. There would be some losses, but it wouldn't be serious.

「Don't stop! We will be out of the woods soon, we will link up with our comrades there!」

The soldiers carried their comrades and kept running. They were certain they had nothing else to worry about. They were temporarily separated into platoons, but they already took that into consideration. Since they were advancing in the same direction, guided by compasses, their allies couldn't be too far away. After moving forward, they would reorganize into a battalion and exit the jungle as one to fight together — at least that's what their OC said.

「—I see it! Light signal from our allies!」

One soldier yelled loudly— by their set protocol, when consolidating their forces in the jungle, they need to first send light signals in the directions where an allied unit might be. Only when that wasn't enough to convey the message would a gong be struck. Both methods were susceptible to enemy detection, but it wouldn't be a problem if they had sufficient numbers.

「Alright— scout, head towards the light. To be safe, make sure they are really our allies.」

The scout sprinted out of the bushes on that order, feeling nervous. It might look like the light signal of an Imperial unit, but he would likely die if that were the enemy in disguise.

「Please be our allies...!」

Praying sincerely for that, the scout timidly leaned forth and looked — then sighed in relief. The people forming up there were all

wearing the familiar Imperial uniforms.

「Hey～ I'm Private First Class Gaebo of the 8th Wind Gun platoon! My unit will be coming over to link up! Please be ready to receive us! 」

Seeing that the other party had received the message, Private First Class Gaebo immediately turned back to report— this decision would get him in trouble in the future for 「failing to confirm which unit the ally was from」, but the one who got punished wasn't him, but his superior for failing to train him adequately.

「I have confirmed! They are allies!」

「Good, let's go link up with them! We have a large group and is easily targeted, don't let down your guard of our surroundings!」

Following their OC's instruction, the soldiers walked towards the faint light at the other end of the trees. Linking up with allies would increase morale more than pure numbers might suggest. Being forced to split up in the dim forest caused a lot of pressure on them mentally.

「Sorry for the wait, I'm an OC, First Lieutenant Sueruki. Let's reorganize, which platoon are you from?」

Some people think that this question should be asked when the scout was sent out. If a platoon was sent out on an independent

mission, it would be natural to ask that. However, it didn't register with them that they were moving independently, and thought they were moving as a battalion and just linking up with their allies who were out of sight momentarily. In short, their lack of sense of danger was their fatal mistake.

「Yes, that's it, OC Sir.」

Bullets flew out in place of a reply, mowing down the OC and around ten men in an instant.

「— Huh?」

Private First Class Gaebo who was standing slightly behind them escaped the massacre and didn't realize what was happening. Then his comrades fell before him in the second salvo. The coin finally dropped — the other party was wearing familiar Imperial uniforms, but their faces in the shadows were unfamiliar to him.

「U-Uwahhh—!」

The third salvo hit the Imperial soldiers standing stiffly, followed by a merciless charge.

After entering the jungle, the commander-in-chief Matthew walked at the rear of the procession. He didn't shy away from the frontlines if necessary but opt to stay with the rear echelon this time.

「... Hmm...?」

He made this decision in the event something like this happened. A strange aura came from the trees ahead. He could sense something like a beast being herded. He fixed his bayonet onto his Wind Gun on reflex and said to the men around him.

「... Halt. Luminous soldiers, prepare to shine.」

Not many people understood the intent of his orders, but still set about carrying them out. The unit in front aimed their crossbows mounted with Luminous Sprites to the front— seconds later, a figure charged out of the violently shaking woods.

「— Shine the light!」

Matthew yelled at the right timing. The bright light lit up the person charging out, and the pudgy youth yelled when the person stopped briefly.

「Don’t move, we are friendlies! Stand down!」

He conveyed the short facts and gave an order. These were movements drilled into all soldiers who would carry them out on reflex before their minds could grasp what was happening. Matthew asked the person standing still, dazed by the light.

「... You alone? What happened?」

Before Matthew was a hysteric Imperial soldier with a twitching face. After taking tens of seconds to grasp the situation, the soldier sat on his butt in relief.

「Major Tetzirich... I-I’m saved...」

「There’s no time for you to rest, explain the situation.」

On Matthew’s stiff urging, the soldier stood up and said:

「... We got attacked up ahead. Please be careful, Major. The enemy disguised themselves as our allies!」

In all the battlefields in the world, the commanders would prepare for the worst outcome. At times, that would be total annihilation, but most commanders wouldn’t set their worst-case scenario that far. Which was the baseline responsibility of the commander.

In this situation, the worst situation would be failing to break through the jungle and suffer significant losses during the inevitable retreat. Depending on how well prepared the enemy was, Matthew judged that such a tragedy might be possible and was prepared to deal with it. In any case, they could handle everything up to this stage. Cover the retreat of their comrades, rally their forces, and fall back. By giving up on the devotees on the other side of the jungle,

they could prevent further losses.

In that sense, it wasn't a complete loss, such setbacks were within expectations. What they feared was their army being forced into an unexpectedly tight spot.

That was the situation right now. The unit deeper into the forest got attacked — that much was fine. The problem was the enemy disguising as Imperial troops. The units rushing to rally and getting plummeted would be the worst situation. Most of their forces would fall into disarray and run around the jungle in a panic.

But a further tragedy awaits. The soldiers focused only on escaping death would lose their way in the woods and run into friendlies in the rear if they were lucky, but if they encountered an enemy disguised as allies — the psychological effect on the army was the biggest blow.

Turning the uplifting reunion with allies in the dim forest into a fearful encounter.
Are they really our allies?
It would be difficult for them to erase that suspicion.

The means of confirming the other party was too lacking in this jungle. Light messages and voice communications were easy to disguise, even if the safe word was correct, it might be leaked from an ally taken prisoner. Even if a name and unit was reported by a familiar voice, that was still not enough. There might be someone pointing a gun at his back.

And the real Kioka soldiers were advancing to push back the scampering Imperial soldiers. Their goal wasn't to purge the enemy, but to create chaos on the battlefield. Their actual kill count with the disguised attack might not be too significant, but the mental effect would accumulate. Doubt and suspicion would be the worst epidemic for forces rallying together, leading to one result. Friendly units attacking each other.

「—

*Mum**

, they took the bait. Although this method isn't refined at all.」

After receiving his subordinate's report, the 「Insomniac Brilliant General」—Jean Major General Arkinex evaluated the scheme that he laid out. But his adjutant Miara shook her head.

「Don't mind it, Jean. War is filled with deceit. Simply put, this is the fault of the enemy for showing their weak point.」

His adjutant said nonchalantly, which made Jean smile awkwardly— If the 「Insomniac Brilliant General」 fell for this scheme, she would lash out unreservedly at the enemy. Despite this obvious double standard, Jean wasn't so dense as to call her out.

「Yes, that's true— but that's not the only reason why you made such a sullen face, right? Insomniac Brilliant General.」

The old sage in white robes interjected. No longer surprised at being seen through, Jean nodded quietly.

「

Yah

*, that's right… Seeing through this scheme ahead of time is a standard.」

「Which means the enemy commander can't stand up to you, right? But I think we should judge by how he respond to the situation.」

「I can tell by how the earlier battles were handled. Their commander should be able to escape the jungle with quite a number of his men and fall into a quagmire. If he didn't abandon a significant number of his troops, they wouldn't be able to escape.」

Jean said with a sigh. The intense fighting spirit was gone from his eyes, replaced by feelings of pity.

「—All units, fall back! Sound the gong!」

Matthew wasted no time to make that decision, which was praiseworthy. Realizing the enemy's strategy got the better of him, he accepted this tactical defeat, which leaves retreat as the only option. If they passed through the jungle without coordinating their forces, they would just get defeated piecemeal once they exit.

「Fall back! Fall back!」 「Turn around, go back～!」

The gongs announcing the retreat sounded in the jungle, and the units near the source started turning back while sounding the gongs of their own.

By relaying the retreat order this way, they could safely recall more than 80% of their troops — if things went according to plan.

「Okay— let's sound the gong too.」

The Kioka soldiers scattered around the jungle sounded their gongs at the same time to disrupt the enemy. The gongs mixed together in the jungle which obscured the original meaning.

「T-This sound— what's going on?」 「What's happening, damn it!」

The fear of the panicking Imperial soldiers was getting stronger. Aside from retreating, the gongs could also be used to signal a charge. It was impossible to differentiate the signal between enemy and ally. The continuous gong made many of them fear a big enemy offensive was coming.

「W-What the hell!?」 「W-What should we do...!」

Many of the wandering Imperial soldiers cut off from the chain of command couldn't even tell where they were. Unable to tell friend

from foe, their bloodshot eyes darted frantically in the dim jungle as the meaningless gong sound continued.

「U-Uwaahhh...!」

In such a situation, it was virtually impossible to differentiate friend from foe. The soldiers in deep confusion fell into two distinctively different categories. Either running wildly like headless chickens or standing stiffly in place.

The former was targets ripe for the picking for Kioka soldiers who found them, while the latter had a higher chance of survival. Ironically, the soldiers who couldn’t move in the jungle played the biggest part in the Insomniac Brilliant General’s scheme.

As they had delved deep into the jungle, it took a long time for the withdrawal to be completed. When the soldiers stopped coming out of the forest, the sky was already dark. Matthew then ordered a roll call of all personnels.

「Report! How many men are still lost!?」

Roll calls were time consuming. Two OCs were missing, so he had to elevate two Second Lieutenants to replace them on the spot. Matthew then understood the situation of his forces.

「... About half of our men are still in the forest?」

It took all that he had to state this fact without his voice trembling. The better he grasped the situation, the more he wanted to sit on the ground with his head in his hands. He realized he was facing a huge problem.

「There are more than 2,000 men left inside the forest.」

Matthew spoke as calmly as he could— if this was the case, he had to bring back the lost troopers as their commander. He had to use all the tricks in the bag to rescue his comrades who are standing stiffly in place from shock in the darkness, who would die in the hands of the Kioka soldiers soon.

— *So this is the enemy's plan all along? Damn it.*

Suppressing the curses he couldn't let his subordinates hear in his heart, the slightly plump youth took several deep breaths and started cleaning up after this defeat— focusing on cutting his losses and fighting a long painful battle devoid of any chance of victory.

Jean Arkinex described Matthew's situation as a quagmire, and as time passed, this description proved to be accurate— Five days after they started their rescue operation, there were still more than 1,000 soldiers in the jungle.

「Damn it...!」

Matthew couldn't help grumbling. Running into a situation he had never faced before and running a rescue operation instead of

fighting a battle, he couldn’t deal with the situation properly.

In the first place, there was a big contradiction in his rescue plan. They had to enter the jungle to rescue their comrades who were left behind, and the enemy would aim for that and attack. So the rescue operation might create more casualties.

If they weren’t careful— or rather, if their plans weren’t executed perfectly, there might be more losses than the people they actually rescue. In fact, there were already more than a hundred casualties. The more they struggled, the more the devious plan drew them in like a quagmire. They had to be careful to not open their wounds further, which waste even more time. In the meantime, their comrades were growing more exhausted in the jungle, so even time was on the enemy’s side.

「Our rescue targets are bait in the enemy’s eyes, huh… The ease of operation between us and the enemy is too different, it’s only natural we will fall into a quagmire.」

Compared to the enemy who just need to kill the Imperial soldiers in the jungle and their rescuers, Matthew’s rescue operation was much more tedious. First, the rescue targets were reluctant to be saved. The disguised attack by the Kioka made them suspicious, and hunger lowered their decision making abilities, leading them to point their weapons at allies. Just convincing them to leave took a lot of effort, and they had to be wary of Kioka attacks at the same time.

「What should I do… The situation is getting worse.」

Matthew was walking circles inside his tent, just like his train of thought that was trapped in a loop. The problem wasn't his command or the performance of his men, but the situation in hand. It was hard to overturn the unfavourable strategic situation through the use of tactics, the only way was to add in some new elements —

「Major Tetzirich!」

His adjutant interjected his neverending train of thought. There was a cheer in his tone, which made Matthew look his way with surprise and expectation.

「What is it? Has a unit returned?」

「Unfortunately, no… But this news is equally good.」

His adjutant said as he pointed out the tent. Matthew walked out confusedly— and understood when he saw the unit in tidy formation outside.

「—Torway?」

The Wind Gunners stood with their rifles in hand, and the tall commander in their fore was the jade-eyed youth Matthew was so familiar with— Lieutenant Colonel Torway Remeon.

「Sorry for being late. Reinforcements have arrived, Ma-kun.」

That was the first thing Torway said. His tone was firmer compared to two years ago, and a gloom clouded his eyes— but the sense of reliability he had overpowered all that. Matthew hurried to his side.

「Aren't you focusing on training your subordinates? You rushed over after setting aside the training?」

「Yes. They are shaping up well, so I think it's a good chance to commit them into battle.」

Torway looked behind him where his men stood in neat ranks, eager to get into action.

「I bought the best trained battalion with me. It will depend on the situation, but they wouldn't get in the way. How goes the battle?」

「Really badly. Many of our comrades are still left in the jungle.」

Matthew quickly briefed him on the situation. Torway understood the situation from the briefing that touched on all the key points and nodded.

「I see. Rescuing our comrades will still be tricky— that aside, the battlefield is the jungle, right?」

「Huh? Y-Yes.」

There was a strange eagerness in his question, and Matthew tilted his head puzzledly. Torway looked at the problematic jungle and said.

「I was right to come here… This is a great chance for a debut battle.」

A chill went down Matthew's spine. It was just an instant, but he saw the jade-eyed youth curled his lips.

For the Kioka soldiers deployed in the woods, the battle they fought so far had been one sided.

They had not encountered any effective resistance so far, spending most of their time chasing demoralized Imperial soldiers and engaging those who were trying to rescue them. They had the initiative for both scenarios, and didn't need to be too concerned about their sporadic retaliatory fire.

What worried them was fighting each other. To prevent that, most of the disguised units had retreated. They contributed greatly in making the enemy spooked and suspicious, but their continued presence would do more harm than good. Allies would hesitate to attack if they knew a friendly unit was disguised as the enemy.

「...Hmm, speaking of which, our brilliant General is amazing.」

For a foot soldier, they would never mistake the advantage to be their own doing. The grunts all knew that this situation was created

by their commander.

The entire plan started with the incitement of Aldera devotees to escape the Empire. Using the devotees as bait, they lure the Imperial army to the mountain to set up a repeat of the grueling battle of the Northern Territories. If the Imperials didn't repeat the mistake and fought valiantly, they would lure them into the jungle where a new quagmire had been set up.

No matter how they struggled, the enemy was played like a fiddle by Jean Arkinex from beginning to the end. As they were feeling awed by this fact, the Kioka soldiers sensed the presence of prey from their high vantage point in the trees.

— *There's light in the bushes over there.*

The soldier gestured with a look silently, and his comrade in the neighbouring tree nodded.

— I will signal our allies. They will be here soon.

— It's too far. Wait for them to come nearer.

They nodded and climbed down from the trees. Moving quietly, they soon set up position in the woods close to the targets.

— *Hold your fire. Wait for them to link up before wiping them all out.*

— I know. I won't mess this up now.

They were already familiar with how to efficiently take out the pitiful Imperials, biding their time for a good shot— suddenly, the sound of exploding compressed air came from the distance.

—...? Where did that gunshot come from?

The worried soldier elbowed his comrade laying prone beside him, but didn't get a response. He looked his way quizzingly.

—Huh?

He saw a comrade collapse with a hole his forehead.

「... No way, hey—」

He couldn't immediately understand the situation and called out. That instant, a second gunshot rang out— and he met the same fate as the man beside him.

「— Second round, head shot. Both targets aren't moving, probably dead.」

「Understood. Any other signs of the enemy nearby?」

「None yet. Continuing with search and rescue operation.」



「Hah, hah—」

There were many people who didn’t run into an ally after losing contact with their units, and crawled fearfully in the grass. They attempted to head west by following their compass, but as they couldn’t head in that direction in a beeline, they couldn’t grasp how close they were to the destination.

「No no no… I don’t want to die...!」

A man kept repeating that as he focused on hiding, advancing, and hiding again.

He felt several presence along the way, but he didn’t seek help from them. Because four days ago, he witnessed a fellow Imperial soldier shot by people wearing Imperial uniforms they were seeking help from.

He couldn’t trust anyone. That was how he felt, and he didn’t think there was any way out aside from traveling to the basecamp by himself. That was why he crawled forward in fear, occasionally running for less than 10 seconds before proning down again. If he wasted any more time, his unit would have left before he reached. This sense of danger made him even more anxious.

「Ughh, Ugghh… Woaahh?」

The soldier who was crawling into a deadend suddenly found the world upside down. He was hanging by his feet with his head pointed

to the ground.

「Huh… Wha...?」

It happened so suddenly that he just stared with his eyes and mouth wide open. Someone grabbed him from behind.

「—?」

「Calm down, I’m on your side.」

The other party whispered into his ear, but he was too frantic to accept it literally. The soldier struggled in this upside down position, and a punch landed on his chest mercilessly.

「Guahh—!」

「I told you to calm down. If I’m your enemy, you would already be dead, got it?」

The soldier gasped for air a little as the hand that hit his chest sooth his back this time. Feeling no hostility from that hand, the soldier slowly collected himself. The man who caught him played both the good guy and the bad guy in this scenario, but no one thought it was a problem.

「Composed yourself yet? Understand that we are on the same team?」

「— Y-Yes.」

「I'm letting you down, don't pounce on me. I caught you with this trap to temporary incapacitate you, for the safety of both of us.」

The man explained curtly as he untied the rope around the soldier's ankle. Standing on the ground once again, the soldier finally realized he had escaped his dead end.

Half a day after Torway joined the fray, the gradual changes in the jungle reached the commander of the Kioka camp.

「... We suffered significant losses?」

Reading the reports submitted to him repeatedly, Jean's eyes turned serious. This was completely out of his expectation and not something he could ignore easily. If that man wasn't with the enemy, the Imperial army would be helpless in the jungle— that was how he felt.

「... Something's wrong. This battlefield was set up by me, so they couldn't have known the jungle would become the main stage. But the enemy is retaliating effectively at such a timing...」

「It has been six days, so there’s a handful of enemies who can deal with this situation? It doesn’t change the big picture much...」

「No, even if you say that, we shouldn’t be suffering this much losses. A new element has joined the battle, for example...」

「For example, reinforcements skilled in jungle warfare? That’s a big threat. Their standards might be even better than the Phantom Unit.
」

Anarai said a terrible line. Unable to refute that, the people around him fell silent, and only Jean showed a fearless smile.

「
*Yah**
, that is a threat, but they didn’t turn the tide. In the end, this doesn’t change the fact that the enemy is on the defensive.」

「You are right. But the rescue of their forces will be expedited, I assume you already have the next plan in mind, correct?」

「There’s no need for that, this is just the best chance to attack a retreating enemy.」

「Which means— there’s no need to change the battle inside the jungle?」

「Correct. They probably want to withdraw quickly, so this situation won't last too long, and we won't need to dwell over the difficult to grasp jungle battle. As for the identity of their reinforcements, we can just investigate and deal with them after they are out of the woods.」

「Indeed. Since the enemy covering their retreat is as good as the Phantom Unit, you will have your share of fun too.」

The old sage taunted a little more than usual. Harrah who had been quiet took a step forward with his arms crossed.

「You are looking down on our Major General a little too much there, Gramps Anarai. It can't be helped since you don't know, but the real Phantom Unit isn't Jean's ally right from the outset. He defeated those Shadows with his own strength to earn their respect and loyalty.」

He said proudly with a hand on Miara's head.

「Even Miara was a crazy bitch when they first met, nothing like how she is now.」

「Harrah! I told you tons of times not to mention the past!」

「Oh, that's the first time I heard that. Seems like you have plenty of heroic exploits, tell me more in detail when we have the time.」

「

Yah

*, as you wish, Professor. However, I'm more interested in the battle at hand instead of the victories of the past.」

Jean turned his eyes back to the jungle mid conversation. Anarai conceded that he didn't need to taunt Jean in the first place, since Jean wasn't being careless at all.

While Matthew and Torway were struggling against Jean's scheme, the perspective changes westward, to the foot of the mountain range, where the Imperial forces faced off against the devotees refusing to disperse. However, the arrival of a new face raised the tension of the soldiers dramatically.

「... They are actually reenacting the Grand Escape in the Bible. 『Fear not, and do not turn back. God has abandoned this land』— so that's how it is, huh.」

Empress Chamille Kitra Katjvanmaninik recited from the Bible as she looked at the devotees. As the monarch of the nation betrayed by the Church followers, how did she feel about this? No one could guess what she thought.

「The rot has set in for far too long, so there is no way to save the nation. Is that what God has judged, Shia?」

「...」

The Fire Sprite inside the pouch on her waist held its peace. The Sprites which were the servants of God, neither confirm nor deny the teachings of the Aldera Church.

「Maybe God and I will get along better than I expected.」

The Empress cracked a joke unbecoming of a monarch. Shia was the only one who heard her, which was a blessing in a sense.

At this moment— a figure approached the Empress who had an aura that kept others away in both a positive and negative sense. Standing beside her intimately in a way only members of the Knights Corp could, Haro said to her.

「They are not giving up… I don't understand the feelings of people fleeing from their country of birth.」

「... Well, I shouldn't assume anything.」

The Empress said discreetly.
If you dilute my hatred towards this country by 10,000 parts, that should be how they feel—

she stopped herself from answering that way.

「In any case, this is just a matter of time. I don't intend to yield here. When starving to death becomes a clear threat, they will start to see reason.」

The Empress showed a tragic smile. At the same time, there was self mockery in her smile. She was getting good at playing the role of the tyrant and saying such lines.

「To be frank, Matthew and the others on the front line is a bigger concern for me. No matter how tough the situation might be, Torway should be of some help— Hmm?」

The Empress stopped mid sentence and looked past the dazed Haro and into the distance. At the horizon opposite from the devotees.

「...Haro. I remember you saying that reinforcements will be coming.」

「Huh? Oh, right. The base said they will be sending 2,000 men over, but they seemed to be delayed.」

「The numbers match up— Is that our reinforcements?」

The Empress asked with her gaze locked at a fixed point. The unusual air about her made Haro carefully look in the same direction— Shortly after, she found 2,000 soldiers in tidy formation advancing

this way.

「Hmm—? T-That's—」

「Those aren't civilians, but the formation differs from the Imperial military. It sounds hard to believe— but that appears to be Kioka forces.」

「B-But this is Imperial territory? It's so far away from the borders—」

「I can think of a few possibilities, but their origins aren't the issue right now. Send a cavalry regiment— No, we won't make it from this position.」

They pulled some distance away to prevent an uprising, but that had an adverse effect right now— the Empress clicked her tongue and turned.

「Their goal is to get the devotees— or link up with them. It's too late to stop them from getting into contact, things are getting troublesome.」

Chamille exited the base tent. Troubled by the speed she changed her approach— no, pretending to be troubled by that, the woman with Haro's face pulled away from the Empress and muttered to herself.

「... They are finally here. I made so many arrangements and they are acting so slowly～ really now.」

Patrenshina shrugged after saying that— she did summon 2,000 reinforcements from nearby. But that unit left the prison camp before the prison break, then turned back after receiving news of the prison break. She made them run around in circles.

「Fufufu.」

In the end, the ones here were a new 2,000 enemy unit— her mouth arc seductively, smiling viciously in a different manner from the Empress.

「Well, looks like a battle will be breaking out.」

Looking at the Imperial army who had noticed their approach and was readying for battle, Greg sighed. With the 「Great Mother of White Wings」 taking back command, his tense shoulders had relaxed a little.

Right now, they had 2,000 odd soldiers. After securing supplies from a base they passed by, They headed to the mountains and picked up their 400 men in the Prison Camp. At first, these soldiers were ready to become sacrifices, but they managed to escape by using the hostages from the Prison Camp. This was great news for Greg, but the imminent battle weighed heavily on his heart.

「Our main occupation is sea battle, but things had been hard ever since we escaped the Prison Camp.」

「Even when I sat by the window and waited quietly for rescue, there wasn't any young clan head coming to fetch me on his golden eagle. Reality isn’t as idealistic as the stories.」

Elulufay said calmly with her arms crossed. The unfamiliar terms made Greg tilt his head quizzingly before saying.

「... If I’m not wrong, is that a rip off of 『Prince Charming』 and his white steed?」

「I only have a vague idea, but you are probably right. The Falconer Tribes don’t have royals or the culture of riding horses.」

「Oh～ Rear Admiral, there was a time when you have such fantasies too?」

「Of course. Unfortunately, I realized settling the problem myself is faster than waiting for aid.」

「So you buried your maiden heart and are too busy for your fated meeting with the young clan head. How pitiful.」

「Hmm, I just realized something. You might be my adjutant, but in a sense, you are also a large lump of meat— Don’t you agree, Misai!?

」

「No, I'm just kidding. Wait, stop, Misai, I'm sorry, staph. Uwah, uwahh!」

With a sideway glance at the fierce battle between her adjutant and beloved bird, Elulufay swept her gaze at the horde of Imperial citizens that covered her entire field of vision.

「Alright, these must be the refugees who want to escape. They seem wary of us, so let's give them a little gift.」

She snapped her fingers and her men pulled wagons over. After pulling the covers back, there were all sorts of supplies like food, clothing and medical supplies. The mob cried at that sight, and also—

「It might be weird for me to say this since I'm executing this plan, but the person who envisioned this development is really despicable.
」

With that line implying her hidden disgust, the guns glinted under the sunlight— The Wind Guns that became outdated with the advent of the Air Rifles. They simply piled the guns they looted from the base's warehouse onto the wagons.

「Sigh, I won't criticize this plan for being illogical. I heard the Grand Escape that formed the basis of this plan wasn't a rescue, but a

trial— There is no point if you don't work for it yourselves, there must be some religious significance here.」

Before them were weapons of war. In the past, the devotees couldn't get this power, and it was a taboo even if they did. And now, it's within their reach.

「...」「...」「—」

The devotees had a dangerous gleam in their eyes— soon, the first one hesitantly reached out for the gun, as if they were mesmerized by its metallic gleam.

They soon learn that the trial of a god and the temptation of the devil were at times ironically similar.

Chapter 4: Patrenshina

Let's tell a story that begins with 「A long long time ago～」.

There was a girl from a certain place.

She was an impoverished girl that stood out in no other way except for her height. She was the eldest daughter of the poorest sharecropping family, taking care of her five younger brothers in place of her parents who spent all day in the field.

— We will leave the house work to you, you are a good girl, right?

Her parents used these words as a charm to give many responsibilities to their daughter. The girl who thought this was natural wasn't unhappy. Her brothers were bothersome, but everyone was cute. When she saw her parents return in exhaustion, she didn't want to burden them more with her wilfulness. Because of her nature, she would choose to endure when she was sad. She was a good girl throughout her impoverished life.

This kind girl has terrible luck, her parents died one after another from exhaustion when she was eight. She and her five brothers were kicked from relatives to relatives like a ball, before a distant relative with a large family took them in.

And of course, they weren't taken in as a part of their family. They were servants in name and were in fact, slaves. This was a common occurrence.

Even so, the family who took them in kept up appearance as being benevolent to their neighbours. The girl was just eight, and the only ones who could work were her and the eldest son, maybe the second son too. The other three brothers were just too young.

There were six more mouths to feed, and three of them freeloaded— from that perspective, the people were impressed by that large family who took care of their relatives. The girl and her brothers had no objections. They knew from the start that they were in no position to complain, and understood they were an eyesore to that family. Because their distant relatives told them in no uncertain

terms.

Anyway, the girl worked hard from the day she was adopted. Her distant relative threatened to not feed her brothers, so she had no other choice. From laundry, cleaning, waiting on others, caring for life stocks and chores— she had to shoulder all these laborious tasks without any mercy. The workload was obviously too heavy, and simply put, she was treated like a tool that they didn't mind breaking at any moment. They grinded her mercilessly with the intention of wearing her down, her masters often failing to give her food or any sleep.

The girl's only salvation was her relatively healthy body, given her nutrition and age, or she would have died like her parents. In her despairing situation, this was the only silver lining— No, this was actually her biggest misfortune.

No matter how hard she worked to build up a bulwark for their livelihood, it was difficult to protect her brothers' health from the harsh working environment. The first to fall ill was the second son— his dry cough was getting worse and he was having trouble breathing. The girl nursed him during her breaks between work, but his condition didn't improve after a month. Her distant relatives wanted to 「send him to the doctor to recuperate」, brought the second son out of the house and told the remaining siblings.

— *If you do your work properly, I will let your kid brother receive adequate treatment.*

So you have to work twice as hard,
they said. The girl nodded and did as they said. Since she could save her brother, she didn't have any other choice.

Three years passed. In this harsh environment, her brothers collapsed one after another. There wasn't any good news. No matter how much she yearned, the second son and the first son who got taken away next didn't return.

It wouldn't be a surprise if she collapsed in such an environment, but the girl's body was so tough that it even surprised herself, getting used to the rough meals and short sleep. In contrast, her contribution was twice as much as others, but her distant relatives didn't improve their treatment towards her. They just smiled at this tool that lasted longer than expected, as if to congratulate themselves for picking the right goods.

Her distant relatives harassed her frequently. The boondocks they lived in lacked entertainment, so people who were obviously of a lower cast would often end up as their prey. Sneers and admonishments were fine, but physical violence happened often too. But even such bullying required a superficial reason, and the reason they used was her filthy appearance. That was the most convenient excuse for them, because they didn't give her any change of clothes, so she was always dirty.

Despite these abuses, the girl never bore any grudge towards the distant relatives. She locked away her discontent deep inside, thinking that she only got to survive thanks to them. The girl's gentle

personality made her choose this.

However— there would be times when her heart couldn't take it anymore. She would curl herself into a ball in her bed made from straws, and hum the song her late mother sang to her.

— *The mischievous girl Patrenshina couldn't sit still today too.*

She opened her eyes wide in search of prey.

Found one, found one, a girl walking on the streets in red.

Going to the next town to deliver lunch to her carpenter Dad.

Watch me eat that lunch and put in a snake!

The thought of that made her heart pound as she started to hum.

「Let's start our wonderful work. Let's get on with it」—

The light hearted rhythm of the children's tale described the life of the worrisome girl Patrenshina who loves to pull pranks.

Of all the songs her parents sang to her, she liked this one the most. Because Patrenshina depicted in the lyrics was so carefree. Dreaming about such a liberal life could even make the girl forget about her circumstances and get a momentary respite. Because Patrenshina

did things for her that she couldn't do.

The mischievous child was forgiven by the people around her, which meant that they lived an easy life. For the girl who had never enjoyed any luxuries, she had no choice but to be a good girl— Hence, Patrenshina was a hero to her in a sense, an aspiration she could never reach. As she imagined her appearance, words and action— Patrenshina became more than just a fictional character, and was akin to the best friend of the girl.

The girl dreamed. How would Patrenshina prank her distant relatives? Only at times like this, she would concoct cruel plans for vengeance that she had never tried before. The ideas the girl couldn't imagine, Patrenshina could. The things she couldn't do, Patrenshina could. That's right— because Patrenshina wasn't herself, she could do anything.

Her imagination was her only solace, and the girl quietly lived through the harsh days. By the end of the fourth year, her last brother was 「sent to the doctor」. To avoid their treatment from being stopped, the girl worked desperately, waiting for the day her brothers returned in good health.

One night. Receiving instructions to clean up as usual, the girl headed to the rarely used shack.

But the lights were on in the shack. That shack was used as a place for the young sons of the family to chat, away from the ears of their parents. They did so today too. The girl who had the instructions to clean the shack stood outside at a loss, then heard the conversation

inside the shack.

— That wench sure is dumb, she still believes her brothers will come back.

— Our stingy father will never send freeloaders to the hospital.

The girl turned stiff. She creeped close to the window and peeked in quietly.

— It's bothersome to take care of them one by one. They still resist even though they are sick.

— That's right, they put up quite a fight and even bit my hand.

— Your technique is lacking. Slaughtering them is no different from slaughtering pigs, right? Just like this～

The eldest son demonstrated the steps he took 「back then」, with an insidious smile as if he was showing off his skills.

— Grab their head tightly from behind and slit their throat. Isn't that simple?

Seeing the illusion of her brother dying from a cut throat— the girl desperately suppressed the scream and left with her mind blank.

She charged into the rundown shack she used to spend the night, and lay face down onto the straws. The girl slowly collected her thoughts as she recovered from her fears. Realizing the truth, she screamed in silence and groaned in pain.

Indeed— She had never doubted. The girl wasn't stupid. After saying he was sending them to see a doctor, why didn't any of his brothers return? Why wasn't she allowed to visit? Why is the only news about her brothers 「they're still recuperating」? The conclusion from all that was obvious, but the girl forced herself not to think in order to keep her hopes alive— but that was extinguished by the confession of the two sons.

They lied
, the girl muttered. Her brothers were still alive, and will return in good health soon. That was why she worked so hard all this while.

However— someone in her heart refuted coldly. You are wrong, right from the start, those people have no reason to let your brothers live.

— *Hey, what should we do?*

A voice rang in her head. The voice sounded familiar, filled with the cruelty the girl lacked, corrupting her mind like thorns in a vine.

— *Hey, what do you want to do?*

The girl shook her head at the direct question—
I don’t know
.
I don’t know what to do.
Because she was a good girl, she always warned herself not to harbor anger and be driven by hatred. She worked hard to not bear any ill will. At times like this, she didn’t know what action to take.

— *Then I will do what I please.*

Hence— this proposal was the last salvation for the girl.

She stopped thinking. She understood that being a good girl wouldn’t get her anything in return— which meant the girl needed a hero at this moment. She wished from the bottom of her heart for an existence that could easily do the thing that she couldn’t do.

And so, 「she」 answering this wish was inevitable.

— The mischievous girl who likes to pull pranks, Patrenshina, couldn’t stay still today too.

She opened her eyes wide and searched for prey—

The girl naturally opened her mouth and sang. Her song was earnest, as if she was praying for salvation from the gods.

— Found it, found it, the big family of meanies.

The whole family that laughed as they tormented sick children—

Her passionate voice was trembling. The negative feelings locked firmly inside her overflowed like scorching lava.

— I will ■ them, ■ them ■ them ■ them all!

Her heart pounded at that thought and she started humming—

Rage and hatred raised to its peak and gave off a sense of insanity. Her mouth arcs ominously.

「— Let's start our wonderful work. Let's get on with it.」

The end of the tale was also a beginning. After that announcement— the gentle girl who stood up from the hay was a completely different being.

The night of tragedy quietly drew its curtains.

The deafening gunshots and roars echoed at the foot of the Grand Arfatra Mountains, the music of a battlefield.

Two thousand former prisoners and ten thousand partially armed devotees flooded towards the Imperial army before them. There

weren't any teams or groups, a gathering of untrained amateurs—but with enough numbers, they were still a force to be reckoned with. Facing numbers five-folds more than theirs, even trained soldiers would be in danger.

「「「「Fire—!」」」」

Warning and threats were no longer effective. The wind gunners in neat formation pulled their triggers with twitching faces… The shots rang out sporadically, showing their hesitation about shooting their own citizens. Other than exceptions like the Shinnack Tribe uprising, these Imperial soldiers didn't have any experience dealing with a strife started by civilians.

「Hyaa—!」「Hyaa!」「Ehh...!」

The ones who got hit fell with a scream, immediately replaced by the flood charging forth. They were holding the old type Wind Gun distributed by Elulufay's group to retaliate. They were not in groups and using a weapon for the first time, their accuracy was low. But that might not be true if they closed the distance. The soldiers started looking anxious.

「All units hold position! Stop spreading out!」

The Empress shouted loudly at the frantic soldiers. To stop the devotees from charging forth, the Imperials had deployed in a wide frontage to stop the mob, but was admonished by Chamille to be an

inadequate move.

「But Your Majesty, they will escape into the mountains—」

「Imbecile. You want to chase after a flock of sheeps in front of feral wolves?」

She glared sharply at the protesting officer. She had rightly judged that this situation had something to do with the incidents that happened earlier.

「Spreading the troops out would weaken our defences. When we are distracted by the rioters, the Kioka soldiers would strike. Our camp is flying the banners of the Empress all this while. Don't you understand that the enemy will attack with all their might at the signs of any gaps?」

When the king was in sight, any chess player would make an attempt to capture it. Unlike the devotees only trying to escape out of the nation, the Kioka soldiers had an obvious tactical objective. In order to raise morale, Chamille took to the frontlines personally. Announcing her presence with the Empress' banners also included such inherent risks.

Imagining the enemy swarming her way, Chamille said sternly.

「Firm up the defences, form square formations! It will reduce our mobility, the pressing issue right now is to defend against the

enemy's charge. If we don't show any openings, they won't be able to do anything!」

Right now, the 2,000 troops under her command were spread out, blocking the mountain path with their backs to the mountain. However, it was possible to enter the mountain via another way, but it was more dangerous with a more winding path. If the devotees tried to go around, Chamille was originally planning to spread out and stop them. But given the situation, she had to go about it differently.

The Imperials had 2,000 regular soldiers, while the devotees and the Kioka army that suddenly showed up numbered 12,000. That might be so, but it included a large number of non-combatants, and the Kioka army couldn't supply that many weapons. So the actual fighting strength was around 4,000. Their armament was old Wind Guns, so 4,000 didn't really reflect their combat effectiveness. Considering that the opponents were mostly amateurs, the Imperials had the upper hand.

As the Empress gave specific instructions, an officer ran over with a tense face. He knelt before the Empress and reported.

「Your Majesty! It's regrettable, but the frontlines are faltering because of the pressure from the enemy! To ensure your safety, please pull back to the mountains with the Royal guards!」

「— What?」

Chamille furrowed her brows. Her troops were railing just a few minutes after the battle started— it was too soon. They were outnumbered, but the ones charging were just commoners holding weapons, and would be easily stopped by the salvos of the windgunners in formation.

As she looked to the frontlines, she arrived at the answer.

「... Our troops are hesitant on attacking?」

She muttered to herself. As they had their backs to the Grand Arfatra Mountains, the frontlines to the rear echelons where the Empress was located had a gradual slope. This gave Chamille a high vantage point to observe her army.

The soldiers who were struggling to perform their duty against the swarming mob reflected on her pupils. Firing upon their own citizens made them lose their fighting spirits, and the rate of fire dropped significantly—

「Sigh— Like I said, this method has such poor taste.」

Elulufay mumbled at the back of the devotees. The scene before her was far from her ideal battlefield.

「I will have nightmares tonight. They might be citizens of an enemy nation, but using civilians as meat shields doesn't make me happy.」

「That's true, but we can't stand in the front. They will just shoot us down.」

Greg calmly stated his conclusion after considering their difference in armaments. The 「Great Mother of White Wings」 nodded reluctantly.

「You are right. There's no other way, I will harden myself for the sake of my sweet children— prepare to charge!」

Elulufay suppressed her dissatisfaction and ordered with her loud voice. Although she was pushed into sudden combat, her skills had not rusted at all.

「... I see. For better or worse, they believe that we will protect them— huh?」

On the other hand, the Empress recalled what an officer said during Mitokazuruku's revolt.

This comment wasn't confined to just civilians. The Imperial soldiers also recognized their obligations as guardians. It had been a long time since they experienced a large scale civilian revolt, and it was tormenting them.

「... If the eastern territories weren't seized by Kioka, we would have experienced at least one civilian riot. Is this the result for not

shedding blood that should be shed?」

Chamille muttered. Saying that was problematic for a monarch at this point of time, but it was partly true. In the slow death and decline of a country, there was no way the citizens would willingly die together with it. The citizens stirred from their long slumber and seized power to govern themselves— that was what the Empress wanted, but this was terrible timing.

「Looks like I have to speak to them personally.」

Be it citizens or any other foes, if they came at her with hostility, she would take them down. The Empress took a step forward to drive that home to the soldiers, but was stopped by the officer beside her.

「P-Pardon my insolence, Your Majesty! But the risk of exposing you to the enemy would be too high. Why don't we fall back to the mountains? With the high ground and terrain suitable for defending, the fight would be much easier. We can retaliate after Brigadier General Sazarf's unit return...!」

The officer remained kneeling as he raised the advantages of retreating. It took a lifetime of courage for him to continue his persuasion under the Empress' dangerous glare. However, his courage also stemmed from his pride branded into his heart as a guardian.

A hard and icy silence hung over the air. As the Empress reply seemed to be taking forever, the officer blinked away tears. He was

worried about losing his head— when he heard a gentle voice of salvation.

「Your Majesty, I feel the same. We should fall back for now.」

「...Haro.」

The blue haired female officer spoke to her from behind, softening the Empress' eyes a little. The other officers all sighed in relief. There was no better candidate more suited to persuade their monarch.

「Right now, in that group, there are unarmed people, the children and the elderly mixed in with the armed soldiers coming right at us, it would be difficult to attack them. However, the difference in their stamina would show when they scale the mountains. Those with the endurance and fighting spirit would run in front, those without would follow behind. That would make our battle easier.」

Haro gave the advantages of retreating. After closing her eyes and thinking for a few seconds, Chamille accepted this proposal. It was important to change the perspective of the soldiers, but it was more important to minimize their losses.

「...Alright. The mentality of the soldiers aside, this is a logical choice. Leaving a reckless charge on the plains like this aside, I don't think a militia mob can fight in the mountains.」

Empress added to convince herself. Having decided on retreating, she immediately gave the orders to her subordinates.

「Keep firing during our retreat. Don’t panic— the mountains aren’t too far away.」

When Chamille’s group was attacked by the combined forces of the devotee rioters and Kioka soldiers, and started falling back to the mountains— the battle in the jungle in the frontlines far away was changing.

「... This is it.」

The pudgy youth said bitterly with the dense jungle before him. He was torn between his obligations to his men and the demands of him as a commander. Had he saved all his soldiers stuck in the jungle after falling into a trap? — The answer was no. The situation improved dramatically after Torway’s unit proficient in jungle warfare entered the fray, and 70% of the lost soldiers had been retrieved. But that also meant 30% of the lost soldiers were still missing in action.

However, most of them were probably dead or captured. The huge drop in rescued soldiers since two days ago supported this speculation.

「Is this the right time to cease the operation— Damn it!」

Matthew muttered as if to convince himself. He couldn't just stay here either. The moment they were forced to take back their citizens, the battle was already lost. The best he could do now was to minimize their losses.

From that perspective, their next course of action would be crucial. The Kioka forces and Aldera Holy Army would use this chance to attack when they return by their meandering mountain path. It would be difficult to shake off the pursuit and return to the northern territories. And so— in order to preserve their strength to deal with that situation, he had to stop the rescue operation when the efficiency fell below a certain level.

「... When the unit in the woods returns, all units will start to withdraw. Keep it discreet and pretend we are still continuing with rescue efforts. I want to delay the enemy pursuit as much as possible.」

「「「「Yes Sir!」」」」

Understanding Matthew's intent, the junior officers started taking action. Those who usually rebuke their young superior were much more cooperative. It was clear their reckless action led to this dire situation, and Torway's unit who turned things around respecting Matthew also played a part… Even if they disregard all that, they couldn't afford to pick on their superiors if they wish to stop their rank insignia from downgrading after the war.

「... Although our opponent won’t fall for that so easily.」

Matthew watched his men go and muttered softly. He had a feeling that the worst was yet to come, and he couldn’t afford to be optimistic yet. The battlefield before him was devoid of such hopes.

At the same time, at the other end of the jungle where the Kioka basecamp lies. Most of the refugees had been brought to their country, and the atmosphere of a temporary refugee camp was faint now. Major General Jean received his subordinates report in the command post, and just as the pudgy youth feared, he kept a keen eye on any signs of the enemy retreating.

「— Okay, we are going on the offensive. All units prepare to advance and strike the enemy's back.」

Jean said calmly, one of the officers glared at him sharply at that. He was the direct superior of the fort that fell to a surprise attack at the start of the conflict.

「... Will that be wise? The earlier reports showed no signs of the enemy withdrawing, if we attack too hastily, we will suffer heavy losses when we exit the jungle. In my humble opinion, we should be patient and take action when the enemy has turned around for certain.」

His tone was courteous, but his words had a clear hostility. Jean answered candidly to the older Field-grade officer, as if he was talking to any other subordinates.

「
Yah
*, you have a point. But in this case, I have confidence in the enemy commander retreating when the effectiveness of their rescue operation drop below a certain threshold.」

The white-haired officer said smoothly. He ignored the open hostility for now, explaining his methods to the other subordinates who had doubts. This wasn't troublesome or a painful affair for Jean.

「It would be difficult for you to accept with just that. However, the enemy would want to engage us after they reach a favourable terrain in the mountains. Their tactical options would be too limited if they engage us right after we exit the jungle. Don't you think this would go against the wishes of the enemy?」

「......!」

「Furthermore, if we delay our movements at the start, the enemy would be well prepared to defend when they reach the mountains. Our losses in that situation would be greater than any potential losses we would suffer if we got hit while exiting the jungle. So we need to act now, no matter if we can hit the enemy in the back or not.」

Jean already weighed the possibilities on the scale in his heart. In most cases, his thoughts run deeper than the other officers, this time was no exception. Realizing that he couldn't refute the general directly, the field-grade officer scrowled his face unhappily and said

reluctantly.

「... Pardon me. It seems the famous 『Insomniac Brilliant General 』 doesn't need the advice of a mere grunt like me.」

He got up after saying that, then left the tent with the parting words 「I will go check on the men.」 He wanted to use this chance to lower Jean's repute with this debate, but since he failed, he couldn't stand being there. Anarai who observed the chain of events shrugged.

「Hmm, he's so easy to read. Jean, when you have to deal with such people, what kind of position do you usually take? I want to use that as reference.」

「*Mum**, nothing special. If the person is capable, then I will show my prowess and make him obey, even if it takes me some time. If it's someone incompetent, I will remove him from my direct command. As for that man— regrettably, if he doesn't plan to change his attitude, he would be relegated to the latter group.」

「Insomniac Brilliant General」 said with conviction. He had his way of rising through the ranks as a young genius. However, his methodology bordered on arrogance.

「My expectations of my subordinates are for them to be my limbs, carrying out my intent with quick precision. As long as they don't

affect that, they can strive for fame or be as cocky as they want. However, it goes without saying that anything that goes beyond the limits will endanger the organization.」

「That's true. Unfortunately for you, there are many people in any era who put their stock on seniority based on age and experience.」

「
Syah
*. I hope people like that will just look at my hair. They will have peace of mind that way.」

Jean pointed at his white hair in answer.
I see
～ the old sage laughed at that joke.

「As the Professor said, I have enemies within our ranks. From those just trying to trip me up, those who will stab me in the back with any opening, and people who try to exploit me— there are all sorts of troubles.」

The young Jean was promoted repeatedly contrary to the norms, and made lots of enemies for his efforts. There was a difference in scale, but his problem was similar in nature to what Matthew Tetzirich faced— the key difference was that Jean spoke from the position of a victor. From his capabilities as a strategist and the political power struggles of his backers, he achieved victory in all that and reached the rank of a general, and would soar higher in the future. The complaints of a field-grade officer wouldn't waver his steady

foundation.

「That might be so, but I want to focus on our external enemies. A new unknown unit has joined them, and the pressure we exerted on them isn’t enough to gauge their true worth.」

Unconsciously showing the ease and aura of a person in high standings, Jean enjoyed the clash against the enemy commander he couldn’t see yet. He didn’t think he was taking this lightly. No matter what the subject was, he would get hyped up when the time comes to show his strength.

「Be it friend or foe, I would hold expectations towards things I have never seen before. It’s a bad habit that worries my adjutant— Let’s get on with the war.」

The nasty family has 8 males and 7 females, ranging in age from 15 to 70 years old. ■ all of them in one night would be a tall task, even for the mischievous Patrenshina.

However, she wasn’t troubled about how she should ■■. She already thought up plenty of good ideas in the past. When she tended the fire in the kitchen, when she used a charcoal iron to smoothen clothes, when she drew water from the well, she would keep thinking in the stead of the good girl. What she needed to do to not cause a ruckus when she ■■. How she could torment them as much

as possible when she ■■. There were plenty of ways, she just needed to adjust the plan to the situation and carry it out.

「Hmm? What are you doing here at this time— Bleah?」

Her first target was Aunt Kumuru. Arrogant and lazy, she always pushed her work onto the girl and her brothers.

When she saw the girl at the entrance, the Aunt wanted to shout at her, but not having a Sprite on her was her mistake. The girl stuffed a white cloth into her Aunt's mouth to shut her up, pushed her to the wall and slit her throat and thigh with a fruit knife. This was the technique used to slaughter pigs, and blood gushed out of her arteries. Her screams must be just like a pig, and the girl felt it was a pity that she couldn't hear it.

The girl backed away when Aunt Kumuru stopped moving, covered in her Aunt's blood.
This method's no good
, Patrenshina reflected. She was smart, and wouldn't make the same mistake again. She stripped the clothes off her Aunt's ■■, then shoved her under the passageway. She haphazardly cut the cloth to fit her stature, washed the blood off with well water before putting it on. It was shoddy tailoring so the result was terrible, but it didn't look out of place on her since she was always dirty.

Patrenshina perked herself up and set Uncle Tabura as her next target. He was violent and would vent his rage on others when he got drunk. The main reason why her youngest brother collapsed was

because her uncle kicked him in the stomach.

She made her move right after seeing Aunt Kumuru, but she chose to exercise caution and ambushed outside this time. When she struck indoors, the blood and [redacted] was a pain to deal with, so she hoped to take out half of them outside. As she expected, her target appeared a short while later, exiting from the entrance with a Luminous Sprite. He probably felt something was wrong since her Aunt didn’t come back, but he wouldn’t check the bottom of the passageway out of the blue. After Uncle Tabura checked the surroundings, he headed to the well behind the house.

「Kumuru, where are you>? Did you fell into the well— Gwah?」

Patrenshina predicted his actions perfectly, and it was easy to push him down when he leaned in to check the well. She closed the well lid before her Uncle could scream. The well was deep, and it was impossible to climb out without anyone’s help.

Now that she actually tried it, it was a breeze. Not letting her target easily [redacted] was ideal too. She stabbed Uncle Tabura’s flank when she pushed him down too, so he should be floating in the water dyed red from his blood.

「Hmm hmm～」

Patrenshina turned to hide in the trees near the entrance again. If possible, she would like to use the same method to take out two people, but the problem was, her next prey wasn’t coming out. It

was late, so the others should be sleeping. She was dejected that she didn’t get her way, but that fit her plans just fine.

「Well then, let’s follow the set order.」

Patrenshina said as she entered the dark house from the entrance. They got the girl to do their every whim, so the girl knew who slept in which room. She didn’t sense anyone as she walked in the corridor for a while, and judged that the only ones awake were the three sons gathered at the stand alone shack. They probably planned to drink until morning, and use the water in the water vat instead of drawing from the well. She didn’t need to worry about them intruding for the time being.

However, the difficult part would be next. Since they were with their Sprites, it would be difficult to assault them in their sleep. Barging into the room to cover the Sprite’s mouth then stab its owner’s chest── she could pull it off, but she didn’t think it was possible to do it ten times. The humans or Sprites would realize halfway through that something was wrong and start making noises. It was even more dangerous when the people in the room didn’t sleep alone.

And of course, Patrenshina had a plan. She walked past the room of her prey and headed into Uncle Tabura’s room. After sneaking in and closing the door, she opened the closet deep inside, where he kept a large crossbow. That drunkard’s hobby was hunting.

「Heave ho!」

She picked up the crossbow and took a stance. The crossbow was heavy, but the girl was used to carrying heavy loads and could handle it. The problem would be drawing the crossbow. The girl saw her uncle turn the windlass to draw back the string in the past. She was certain that she could do that with the device too.

Patrenshina carried as many bolts into a quiver and brought it with her. She was more reliable now, but her preparations weren't finished. Even with a different weapon, the difficulty in barging into the rooms remained the same.

Leaving the loaded crossbow in the corner of the room for now, Patrenshina pulled the beddings off the beds and laid it before the door. The beddings laid on top of each other was worlds apart from the straws the girl slept on. She resisted the urge to lay on it and finished her preparations.

She walked to the wall and knocked it with the back of her hand. The second daughter of the married couple was sleeping next door. After knocking for a while, the rustling sound of someone getting up came from the next room, probably woken by the knocking. When footsteps approached, Patrenshina picked up the loaded crossbow, standing behind the door that was intentionally left open.

「Really now… Dad, you're noisy… What are you doing in the middle of the night!」

Bones cracked loudly. The shooter approached the second daughter from her blindspot and fired the crossbow point blank at the back of

her head.

The second daughter fell forward right onto the beddings. Blood stained the beddings from the bolt wound on her head. Her spasm stopped after a while.

「Yes, this was a triumph.」

She made a note here, huge success. Patrenshina showed an innocent smile. She took out the target in one shot without any resistance, and minimized the noise. No one in the house was any wiser, and the silence was proof of that.

「Alright, next.」

She quietly closed the door after leaving the room and head to the room of the second daughter she just ■. The first thing she did was to bundle up the Sprite resting in a basket. After she was done, she pulled out the bedding and laid it eagerly in front of the door— and repeated what she did earlier.

「... Hey, Sis, why all the ruckus this late at night!」

「Hey, big Sis, your knocking is noisy!」

「You are still awake? Give it a rest— Guh!」

She moved to the next room after [redacted] a person, putting down six people consecutively. Things were progressing smoothly and Patrenshina was in a great mood. The siblings in this family were in their teens, and it was convenient since there weren't any children sharing rooms. Partway through her plans, she changed into a set of old clothes.

Aside from the three sons in the standalone shack, the only ones in the house were the two couples, the parents and grandparents. The married couple slept in the same room, so [redacted] them would take some effort. If she woke both of them up and they both came to check, her earlier methods wouldn't be able to deal with them safely.

She was reluctant to do so, but Patrenshina decided to wait near the toilet on the first floor, waiting for one of those four to use the washroom. Recently, the old couple often frequent the toilets, so this plan has a high chance of success— As expected, after waiting for less than an hour in the dark, she heard footsteps coming down.

「Ughh, I have to pee so often recently, what a pain… Hmm?」

The grandfather who visited the toilet together with his Luminous Sprite stopped near the entrance of the toilet. Because he saw a bedding about 50 cm from the toilet.

「Why is this thing here… Someone wet the bed?」

He was puzzled, but there was no way his brain groggy from sleep could understand the significance of the bedding here. The old man

opened the door in a panic.

「Good night.」

The familiar girl in the toilet said, and his forehead was struck at that very moment. The old man fell back onto the bedding behind. His ■■ had a surprised face with his mouth wide open, a sign that he didn't understand what happened until the very end.

Patrenshina bundled up the Sprite and shove it into the toilet, turned to the ■■ of the old man and scrowled. She could see a wet stain spreading from his groin. The result was obvious since he was here to use the toilet, but she was still too careless.

「Ugh～ how dirty. I wanted to wait for grandma here… but forget it, scratch that.」

She readily changed her plans and left the toilet, returning to the second floor to stow away the crossbow in the eldest daughter's room for now. She stood before the old couple's room and knocked.

「Grandmother, sorry to disturb you so late, it's me.」

Patrenshina called out softly, and an unhappy voice replied.

「... What's the matter this late at night?」

「Well… Grandfather is nursing his chest uncomfortably, and wants to see grandmother. Can you come down to the first floor and take a look?」

Unable to ignore this excuse, the old crone in pyjamas quickly opened the door. She clicked her tongue when she saw the girl.

「Really now, letting the servant girl into the house so late at night… Lead the way.」

The old crone said with disgust, urging Patrenshina to walk in front. She seemed to think the girl was sent here by her husband. That suited her just fine, so Patrenshina didn't correct her misunderstanding and led her to the stairs leading to the first floor.

「Hey, lend me a shoulder. Dull witted and slow wench.」

The old crone's legs were weak and demanded the girl help her down the stairs haughtily. Patrenshina nodded with a smile and took her left arm, then slowly descended the stairs.

「— Oh, please wait, Grandmother.」

She suddenly stopped midway. Ignoring the frowning old crone, Patrenshina took one step back up, and stood behind the old crone.

「This is just right.」

After deftly adjusting for the difference in height, Patrenshina used the knife she hid on her to slit the old crone’s neck, covered her mouth before she could scream, then stabbed her between her ribs. This technique used on livestocks was effective, and the old crone soon stopped resisting.

「I changed my clothes, but it got dirty again.」

She grumbled after laying the old crone’s [redacted] on the stairs. Getting stained with blood was unavoidable when she used blades. Looking at her arms and chest that had been dyed red, Patrenshina smiled wryly.

「Never mind, the rest is simple.」

Putting her knife away, she returned to the second floor and retrieved the crossbow from the eldest daughter’s room— and headed to the middle-aged couple’s room, the last ones left.

「...Hmm, huh...?」

The irritating sound of several people knocking on the door drowned out the morning caw of the birds, stirring the man from his dream.

「Hey, open up! Is someone in there?」

Someone outside was yelling aggressively. The man lying on the table sat up, nursed his head that was aching over a hangover, then

headed to the entrance of the shack. He unlocked and opened the door, then saw his neighbours standing outside with serious faces.

「... What is it? Why is so many people visiting our place?」

He asked confusedly, and the man leading the group shot him a stern look and questioned him.

「...Rukatoga, where were you from last night until this morning, and what were you doing?」

「What was I doing… I'm here drinking beer with my two younger brothers...」

That man— Rukatoga turned behind him and finally realized something was amiss.

「... Huh, I'm by myself? Where did those two go?」

His brothers who drank with him were missing. The face of the man before him darkened and he answered with a frown.

「They are outside… Both of them are corpses now.」

「... Huh? The hell are you saying?」

「You really don't know— or are you just feigning innocence?」

「No, I don't get what you are saying. What happened?」

「It's a massacre. Except for you, your entire family is dead.」

The contents were too absurd for him to take it literally. Rukatoga opened his mouth wide in shock, and that neighbour continued irately.

「Surāka, Kujimu, Sērute and Kumuru… we found their bodies in the main house. They either got their throat sliced by a blade, or got shot through the head with a bolt. Only a child servant survived. That child has a serious wound on her back too.」

「A-Are you kidding me—」

Rukatoga shrugged and laughed it off as a malicious joke. However, when he turned to the direction where the group was looking, his hope was dashed.

「—Harushi? Hey, pull yourself together, Harushi!」

He pushed through the mob and rushed to his kid brother. The mob looked at him coldly and then averted their gazes.

「We want to check something, and search the shack.」

Instead of a request, it was more like a notification. The group stepped into the shack as Rukatoga held the corpse of his brother with a blank face. Shouts erupted a few seconds later, and a man rushed out of the shack.

「—Rukatoga, what's this?」

In that man's hand was a big crossbow. He raised the crossbow and continued.

「This is Tabura's crossbow, right? I hunted with him before, and remember this. Why is this crossbow with you?」

「Huh...? H-Hell would I know! Why would I have that thing—」

Rukatoga kept shaking his head confusedly. Then another man walked out of the shack.

「You want to use the same excuse for this bloody knife?」

In his hand was a blade stained with dark red fluid. When he saw that knife, Rukatoga finally realized the situation he was in, and he screamed reflexively.

「No— No! It wasn't me!」

「— How unfortunate. You must be so scared.」

A few hours after day break. In a house some distance away from the nasty family, the residents were bandaging the girl's wound.

「I heard what my husband said after he investigated the place. Who would have thought the third son of that family would go insane. I know he is always drinking and playing around, but...」

Patrenshina remained silent as she listened. However, everything was as she expected. She wanted to find a scapegoat as naturally as possible, so she obviously picked someone with a questionable reputation.

「And that man… still claims he didn't do it, and that you set him up. Can't he think of a better excuse? Really now, how can a twelve years old kill several adults in one night?」

Her age made the third son a bigger suspect. Massacring an entire family in one night didn't match the impression this young girl gave. Furthermore, she had a serious injury on her back, so she looked like the victim to a bystander.

「The wound isn't deep, you will recover with adequate rest. Just sleep until lunch.」

Patrenshina smiled weakly and watched the gentle woman leave the room. Her pitiful and determined face was a far cry from her true nature, but she didn’t need to switch personalities since she just needed to pretend for a while.

「... Fufu!」

When the presence on the other side of the wall faded into the distance, she laughed as she laid down in her bed and reviewed the work she had done.

— After taking out everyone in the house, Patrenshina started destroying the evidence. She first checked the sole of her feet. No problems there, there weren't any blood stains. There shouldn’t be any footprints too, but to be safe, she wiped down the path she took with a rag.

「Oh, before that...」

She took off her blood soaked clothes and changed into old children’s clothes found in the third daughter’s room. She has changed three times now. She planned to cut the two sets she changed out of into strips later, and bury them outside. It would be unnatural if her clothes were too clean, so she messed herself up adequately with dirt. It’s a bother, but she pulled out Aunt Kurumu she stuffed under the passageway when she ■ her at the start, and changed her into new clothes. It will be strange if she was the only one who was stripped bare.

After finishing these tasks, Patrenshina headed to the shack and lured out the other people aside from the third son, and ■ them with her crossbow to their backs. Patrenshina already planned to leave one person alive, so her ■■ was complete. She then worked on silencing the Sprites.

Starting from the last person she ■, she took the soul stone of all the Sprites in the house. She just needed to threaten the Sprite with 「do as I say, or I will finish off your master」, it was easy to get her way. She took the Sprites away from the corpses for that very reason. If there was a possibility that their master was alive, they would have to submit to her threats.

She buried the gathered soul stone in the earth outside. The only problem is Uncle Tabura's Luminous Sprite that fell into the well. She lowered a bucket to pull up the Sprite, and forced the Sprite to hand over its soul stone in exchange for saving its master later. She struck a deal, so her uncle had probably just ■■, or was still breathing. That didn't matter. Her priority was to move the soul stones to a place that wouldn't be discovered easily.

After doing all that, Patrenshina went to the shack again. Careful not to wake the snoring third son, she put the tools that she used, the crossbow and the knife, inside the shack.

「Hmm— just one last step.」

She mumbled as she returned to the house, took a knife and rope from the kitchen and left. She tied the knife horizontally on a branch with the right height, but securing the knife became the last

problem. After experimenting for almost 30 minutes, she got a satisfactory result.

「It will hurt.」

Her short words were for the true user of this body, but Patrenshina didn’t hesitate. She aimed her back at the tip of the knife a few steps away, adjusted the angle— then pushed off the ground firmly with both feet.

「— Fufufu.」

The knife stabbed into a spot between her back and shoulder blade, which had been bandaged now. Patrenshina forced the knife into her body with her body weight, stopping when the depth of the wound was almost fatal. Thinking back on the sensation of blood rolling down her back, Patrenshina closed her eyes satisfactory.

「I’m so glad that nasty family is gone—」

She muttered, and then fell silent— ten minutes or so later, she slowly opened her eyes. The girl’s eyes were confused, completely different from before.

「...Huh? Erm, this place is...」

She looked around her nervously. The pain on her back, the sensation of ■■ felt fresh in her hands, the sound of ■■■ moaning

lingered in her ears. All those memories flashed in her mind and vanished.

「— Oh, I see. Patrenshina was here.」

The girl thought and sighed in relief— because she knew she did nothing wrong even though so many things happened.

「Let's start our wonderful work. Let's get on with it.—」

Kioka Republic Capital Norandot, in the Parliament House located in the heart of the capital, Prime Minister's chambers.

Prime Minister Ario Kyakushii hummed a children's song that was out of place as he reviewed some documents. His working attitude naturally attracted the scornful eyes of his secretary who was in the same room.

「... Can't stop yourself from breaking into song? Your work seems to be progressing smoothly, Prime Minister Sir.」

「Oh, sorry. I just remembered a wonderful meeting.」

He apologized but didn’t sound like he meant it. The best proof of that was how he followed up with more words.

「How nostalgic. It all started with the murder case of the third son of a wealthy farming house massacring his whole family. Back then, I was a ground level bureaucrat in the local precinct, and I went over to take a look since I just happen to be in the vicinity.」

The secretary resigned to his fate and listened to the Prime Minister talk about the past. Once he gets like this, he wouldn’t stop.

「At the crime scene, I immediately sensed that — 『a monster rampaged through here』. Fourteen murders happened in the house in just one night, but there were almost no signs of any struggles. The murderer acted swiftly without hesitation, and wasn’t fazed by murder at all.」

The hands of the secretary sorting his documents gradually stopped. *How troubling*
, he thought. For an idle chat during a lull time at work, it was too stimulating.

「It was rash of me, but I got interested in the killer after seeing these signs. Hearing that the culprit had been apprehended, I met him immediately— just one look and I thought 『It’s not him.』 The unsightly behaviour of the mediocre third son didn’t fit that extraordinary murder scene.」

It wasn’t clear if the Prime Minister knew how his listener felt, he got more and more hyped up. Even the secretary who was just listening could visualize the scene from the past.

「During the meeting, he kept screaming 『I was framed』. He didn’t have to tell me that. I left immediately and visited the only survivor of the massacre, a girl who was a servant in the house—」

I was sure of the truth by then
, Ario muttered.
I thought as much
, the secretary nodded. In terms of unearthing talents, this man had superhuman intellect and sensitivity.

「When I met her, the girl was really docile. Her innocence and kindness were shocking, as if the negative aspect of her personality had been removed, so unnatural that it gave me goosebumps — after a short chat, I probed her out and said 『It must be tough killing 14 people in one night, huh』.」

The secretary could easily imagine his reaction. If it intrigued him, he would even put his arm into a beast’s den. Even if his arm got torn off, he would still wear a smile— this politician always gave an extraordinary impression.

「I will never imagine the change she showed at that instant. Reveal her true nature? Showing her dark side? No— 『A different person from one second ago appeared.』 In a word, those were the eyes of a predator. It was the face of a killer only thinking about ways to kill

me and hide my body.」

「......」

「That terrifying presence... was a huge contrast to the accommodating and kind girl from one moment ago.— it mesmerized me, how wonderful. There are humans with such contradictory personalities within one body, it moved me to tears, this was love at first sight. When I realized it, I already started courting her.」

The clinking sound of metal grinding against each other rang out. The Prime Minister had grabbed some puzzle rings and started playing with it enthusiastically.

「I placed the girl by my side and continued to observe her, slowly understanding 'them'. I made several assumptions. First, for Haroma kindness wasn't an act, the opposite was true. Anger, hatred and the intention to hurt others— these negative traits are all shouldered by Patrenshina, leaving Haroma with the kind side of humans. And because of that, she wasn't troubled by killing and betraying others, since those are handled by Patrenshina. No matter what malicious things she did, Haroma won't feel any guilt. It's not that she is unwilling to bear the guilt, she is unable to.

I was mistaken at the start, but their memories aren't shared. What Patrenshina knows Haroma knows too, and the converse is also true. However— whenever Patrenshina assumes control, those memories will become a story that seemed unreal to Haroma, relegating it to a

children's tale of a mischievous girl.

I believe this to be an extreme form of self deception, and this was a great quality for espionage where one has to be flexible and act out different roles depending on the situation— so I didn't hesitate in handing 'them' to the Phantoms.」

A chill ran down the secretary's spine. The metal rings separated with a clink— The untangled puzzle rings were then put back together by the Prime Minister again. They were tangled together but wouldn't merge or separate… Just like how this condition was the most natural for 'them.'

「You know the process. As she was drilled with the techniques of espionage, the trigger to switch her personalities when needed was set up. And so, they were a complete product. The maiden with two souls grew up under the influence of the Shadows, and now, she threatens the Empire as the most vicious Phantom.」

Ario smiled at the Secretary who couldn't help quivering. Seeing the talent he uncovered perform wonderfully would always bring him utmost joy. It was the same for the 「Insomniac Brilliant General」 and the 「Great Mother of White Wings」. They were irreplaceable masterpieces to this man.

「Have fun, Patrenshina. And don't worry, Haroma— you did nothing wrong this time too.」

After retreating to the mountains with the troops under her command, the Empress thought— something was amiss.

This ominous feeling wasn't recent, and had been lingering on her mind since Matthew and company's secret reconnaissance failed to uncover this plot. The devotee's Grand Escape, the battles after pursuing the devotees to the mountains, and worse of all, the Kioka unit at the foot of the mountain in Imperial territory— She deduced that these soldiers probably escaped from the prison camps, but the timing of all couldn't be a coincidence.

Kioka and Ra Saia Alderamin would obviously work covertly. But all of these couldn't be implemented by a few agents here. When viewed independently, the actions of the devotees, and the prison break of the Kioka troops were both plausible occurrences. However, this situation couldn't be possible unless both of them happened at the same timing.

— The Imperial forces on the mountains might suffer a pincer attack from both fronts

「......!」

She wasn't sure how Matthew's unit was doing in the frontlines, or grasped the battle situation yet. But what if they had to withdraw? The situation would deteriorate with time since her unit that should

be providing support from the rear couldn’t spare the effort to do so.

And of course, she was confident of overcoming the worst possibility. Her biggest worry wasn’t this. What frightened her was the nightmarish situation of an agent who could grasp the inner workings of the Imperial forces and could carry out the instructions of their home nation.

— *There’s a spy by my side?*

From her deduction of the situation, it was natural for this idea to surface. Next was the problem. Who was the traitor?

From the weight of the intel that was leaked, that person was a field-grade officer or higher to have learned the intel for this plan. This couldn’t be explained away as the betrayal of a low leveled personnel— the situation was very dire.

Chamille thought with a chill on her back… Assuming— This was just an assumption.

If the person besides her right now was a spy, then all the doubts in her mind would make sense—

「— Your Majesty, danger!」

The sharp warning disrupted her mind— the next moment, blood sprayed before the Empress' eyes.

「Guu...!」

The person blocking her front moaned in pain. The spraying blood on her face made Chamille understand the situation. She— Haro, took the bullet meant for her.

「Ughh… on the slope to the right! Protect Her Majesty!」

Haro didn't give in to the pain and gave out instructions. There was a shooter in the direction she gave, and the soldiers around her returned fire hastily. They never dreamed that the enemy was so close.

「Get a medic here! Haro, pull yourself together! I will bandage you—」

「P-Please don't worry, Your Majesty. See, the bullet hit my shoulder, the wound isn't too deep. We just need to extract the bullet, disinfect the wound and then bandage...」

「That's a bullet aimed at me, what if it's poisoned!? Lie down at once!」

Chamille looked at Haro receiving treatment with a scary face. On the other hand, confident that the Empress' doubt against her had

been cleared, the woman with Haro's face— Patrenshina, showed a pitiful smile.

— *Just as planned.*

That's right, this was all part of her plans. She subtly misdirected the escort detail to create a gap in security, then called in a comrade to shoot at herself. She even got the best situation where she got injured while protecting the Empress.

— *Fufufu*
.

And of course, the bullet wasn't poisoned, Patrenshina even lowered the shooter to reduce the air pressure to be safe from serious injuries. However, one wrong move and she might get hit in the head, so it was unfathomable that anyone was willing to injure themselves.

「I will be fine. Your Majesty, please focus on your own safety.」

Patrenshina feigned a determined expression and said a line filled with the spirit of loyalty— That's right, she would be troubled if this girl wasn't in great health. She was similar to Patrenshina, and one of the irreplaceable heroines prepared by Ario Kyakushii.

That Prime Minister didn't want the Empire to lose its ruler and fall into chaos at this stage. If they revert back to the warring era, their land would be devastated and the wealth they would obtain when

they conquer the Empire would drop drastically. So the Empire needed to maintain minimal order, while the Republic gradually absorbed the land and people that the Empire couldn't manage. That was the winning with patience method that Ario hoped for.

— *To be honest, I'm surprised that you came here directly.*

This plan has three main objectives. Help the devotees with their exodus, recover Elulufay and the prisoners of war, and strike a heavy blow to the Imperial military. Assassinating or abducting the Empress wasn't part of the plan. Chamille's presence was an abnormality.

— *But don't worry, I will protect you.*

The plan was now 90% complete, Patrenshina had to be careful not to overdo it now and stay with the Empress to keep her safe. Ironically, that was the same duty Haro had. The suspicion of her betrayal was cleared for now, and wouldn't affect future operations— However.

— *But everyone else might die.*

The figures of Matthew, Torway, and the others who were probably pulling back from the frontlines appeared in her mind. It would be more convenient for her if the two of them survived, but she wouldn't feel guilty if they didn't. The minute details of kindness were under Haro's jurisdiction, she never possessed them in the first place.

— *Fufufufu!*

Patrenshina— the evil idol born out of the admiration of a girl who couldn’t become a bad girl.

Becoming Patrenshina made her a sadist beyond comprehension. She was someone even Ario Kyakushii couldn’t rein in completely.

To run free and amok, and be a completely merciless scum.

Taking the form of another person’s wish, and frolic on the battlefield as if she was running in a field of flowers.

—*Let’s start our wonderful work. Let’s get on with it.*

The children's song echoed out. It described her great performance and the hellish scenes.

「— Ugh, this is troubling.」

In the Imperial Capital Banhataal far to the south, away from the fires of war ravaging the Grand Arfatra Mountains. On this day, a rare scene was happening in the palace erected in the center of the capital. In the face of this tough situation— Captain Lucanti crossed

her arms in deep thought.

「No— I know you don't have ill intentions. However...」

The way she stammered wasn't like her at all. From the very start, she couldn't use her quick and decisive nature against the person trying to persuade her. How many times had this female knight furrowed her brows like so?

「However, Her Majesty's mission for me is to not let anyone pass during her absence.」

Since that was the Empress' request, there was no need for her to feel troubled. Lucanti Hargunska was a knight who swore fealty to the Empress, she only needed to perform her duties to the best of her abilities. If need be, she was prepared to lay down her life.

「... Is that the last will of that great person? That is troubling for me.」

However— when she remembered the person who gave her this duty, she couldn't treat things as simply as she did before— Knights had to pursue the path of righteousness, but they couldn't be as precise as machines. She was more aware of her way of life than before.

「— Ahh, really now, I get it! I will let you through!」

After struggling til the end, Lucanti threw her arms up in surrender and said with a pout.

「But when Her Majesty come for my head, I will drag you down with me.」

Even in the palace, the harem was silent, unchanging be it night or day.

No one wished to risk their necks for meaningless curiosity. The Empress had taken the throne for more than two years, and the concubines who lived here had long gone. Chamille Kitra Katjvanmaninik had guarded the harem as the largest sanctuary to her.

And now, only one youth lived there. He was both the crime and the punishment to Chamille, and also her love. Today, he stayed in the room facing the inner courtyard, and spent his time in silence too.

「————」

Anyone who knew the youth would think at this sight— he looked just like remnants of his past self.

There was nothing there. None of his unending jokes, teasing words whenever he got a chance, his exaggerated actions that amused others and his dark eyes filled with complicated emotions and intellect. Everything that made him the person he was, was gone. Only a hollow human form that showed that he used to exist was

there.

There was only one information to be gleaned from that. Loss. This youth had lost too many things.

「— Pardon the intrusion, Regiment commander.」

At this moment, a strong voice disturbed the peace that was on par with a cemetery without any reservation.

「This is my first time in the harem, I never imagined it to be so stifling and sullen. If it was me, I will fill it with my mistresses.」

The man who claimed to be the Chief of Staff of the new 「Rising Sun Regiment」, General Kubalha Shiba, said with his usual heartiness. He walked right to the youth he was friends with, and picked him up with no room for negotiations.

「Alright, take a stroll with me… Hmm? What's that in your hand?」

The youth didn't react. When he looked down at his hand covered by a cloth, there was a short sword there. General Shiba nodded sagely.

「... That her sword? Yes, that's important. Secure it properly to your waist.」

After securing the short sword and his partner Kusu onto the youth's waist, Shiba carried the youth on his back.

「Let's be off then. The weather's great, Ikuta-kun.」

To a bystander, it was like a man going on a trip with a friend's son, but this was actually Shiba taking the youth out of the harem after two years.

After leaving the harem, it was clear how liberal Shiba used the phrase 'stroll'. The two of them rode on a carriage through the capital and then headed north, it was clear this would be a long trip.

In contrast to the silent youth who appeared to be dumb, Shiba talked nonstop along the way. He gave his opinion on the scenery outside the carriage window, the memorable times he worked under Bada, mentioned that 「and now, the Empress travels around the country more than I do」, complaining how he couldn't travel easily now.

Time passed by without anyone answering, and the carriage stopped at their destination. Shiba carried the catatonic youth on his back, and locked eyes with the vermillion-haired man standing nearby.

「Did I make you wait long, Field Marshal Sir?」

「—No. You are right on time.」

The middle aged man with dual blades on his waist— Honorary Field Marshal Solvenares Igsem said with a tough iron-like timbre. He looked to the woods behind him and said without any changes to his face.

「The road ahead is hard to traverse.」

「It seems so. Looks like we will be taking a hike.」

General Shiba gauged the quiet woods in front of him. He rolled his shoulders to warm up with the youth on his back, unfazed by the poor terrain. Honorary Field Marshal Igsem added.

「The journey will take 40 minutes. I don't want you to shoulder all the burden for this trip.」

The vermillion-haired general said as he turned his back to the two of them. He rested his knee on the ground and put his arms behind him, ready to carry a person. Sensing his intentions, General Shiba opened his eyes wide.

「This is the responsibility of the host— I will carry him.」

His vision was dark grey. The light was dim and the sound was muffled as if his head were covered by a thick blanket.

Eyes, ears, nose, tongue, all the muscles in his body— all his senses had been cut off from the world. He only wished for nothingness and

sunk into darkness. That was enough. There wasn't anything that interested him in the outside world.

However— if that was so, then how did this start?

When he realized it, he was shaking on a broad back. This was the only thing he felt through his vague consciousness.

It wasn't that comfortable. Aside from the sense of safety, he felt vexed and uneased.

He searched through his memories, but he had never asked his father to carry him. He would always ask that of his mother, but would restrain himself from being wilful to his father. That guy was a wall he would overcome one day— he bore a childish sense of rivalry towards him.

So, he was only carried by his father when there was really no other choice. For example, when he sprained his ankle— that was why he felt vexed. He showed weakness to the person he wanted to surpass, and relied on that person. The feeling of helplessness frustrated him.

「— How light.」

Suddenly, the voice sounded different from his father's. A stiffer and clumsier voice came over the man's shoulder.

How light. Two short words without anything further.

But for some reason, he understood. Understood how many words appeared and vanished in that man's mind before he uttered that, along with many of his thoughts.

Have you been eating properly
— he wanted to ask, worried about the son of his old friend.



Your companions are worried about you
— he wanted to advise him as an elder.

But the fact was, the man would never say either sentence. He understood that he didn't have the right. An adult should naturally show concern, and give valuable advice as seniors in life. But if it was done in just form without substance, it would be the worst excuse.

The man had always been a soldier who protected his nation. To keep order amongst the people and keep the world from falling into chaos. However, this was fatally incompatible with his role of protecting children as an adult.

Not just his own child. In his lifetime, the man had been forced to put everything against the country on a scale. Compared to the absolute weight of protecting the nation, everything else would be sacrificed as trivial matters.

Unfulfilled promises. Friendship he couldn't repay. The man's life was built on countless corpses and regret.

Or rather— he was forced to build on them.

There wasn't much time left. The man and the country he would protect to the bitter end would rot into bones in the near future.

Thinking back, their positions were too similar.

Both of them were failures who failed to protect their loved ones.

After passing through a small path in the woods, a crude stone building that looked large and out of place welcomed them.

「Hi— Welcome, you three.」

When they reached the door, a middle aged man who appeared to be the house owner appeared with a pleasant smile to usher them in. Field Marshal Igsem bowed and entered with the youth on his back. General Shiba followed closely.

「You must be tired, this isn't a convenient location for travel.」

After bringing the three of them to the drawing room, he served them iced tea. As they quenched their thirst with tea, the man looked at the youth who didn't take the cup and asked.

「Is this young man General Bada's...?」

Field Marshal Igsem nodded quietly. The man showed a gentle smile with complicated feelings.

「I see… Well met. Really, well met.」

Without saying anything more, they slowly finished the tea in their hands, as if they were tasting the gravity of the time that had passed.

「It was worth it protecting this place until today.」

After their brief respite, the three men were guided deep into the mansion. The men and women they met along the corridor saluted them, and Shiba noticed when he returned their salutes— they weren't mere mansion servants, and were former military.

「I thought no one would visit again. I was in despair, thinking this will be buried in the shadow of history.」

The way the owner said this emotionally showed there was a reason for the mansion to be built here. He heard Field Marshal Igsem's explanation before, but this was General Shiba's first visit here. He thought about the things lying in wait ahead as he stole a peek at the youth on the vermillion-haired general's back.

「This is the room. Please come in.」

With the locks undone, the double doors opened for the three visitors. Field Marshal Igsem and the youth entered together with General Shiba following right behind in bated breath.

「Ohh...」

Shiba sighed in awe as he surveyed the room. This was a space that should have been lost with time, so nostalgic that it made him tremble.

「These are the things he used...」

A compass, crossbow, pocket watch— there were many relics displayed tidily on the cabinet and table. One of the 「Twin Jewels of the Sun」 looked at the items that had the strong presence of Bada Sankrei with wavering eyes.

「It's well preserved, isn't it? We never neglect in maintaining them. 」

The master of the mansion smiled proudly after saying that, and Shiba nodded deeply with gratitude… no one mentioned it, but it's a miracle that these items had survived. No matter what the truth was, these were the belongings of a convicted war criminal. They weren't expected to be safely preserved, and it wouldn't be a surprise if they were thrown hastily into a furnace.

They remained unscathed because someone didn't wish for that to happen. Surviving a living hell because of the sacrifice of his old friend, the vermillion-haired general did all that he could to set up and preserve this place. Even General Shiba who was a close aide of the late Bada couldn't fully understand how Solvenares must have felt.

「That thing is right at the end— I will take my leave. Please, take your time.」

Seeing that it was the right moment to go, the owner bowed and left the room. His presence faded into the distance after he closed the door, leaving the three people with close ties to the person who had passed on inside. Solvenares Igsem slowly said:

「... I brought you here because—」

He said as he placed the youth in an old chair which was one of the relics. Before him was a rectangular object covered by a cloth, about 50 cm tall, 80 cm wide, and less than 5 cm thick. That object cast a blur reflection on the youth's black pupils.

「First, I want you to see this.」

With that, Solvenares slowly took the covers away.

The moment he witnessed it, the youth's blurry vision was greatly shaken.

「— Ah...」

Bright and vivid colors entered his dim and grey world.

The paintings in the wooden frame didn't feature any unique techniques, the plain strokes and composition that could be found anywhere, and a normal theme that surprised no one. However, the strong feelings of the painter was obvious with every stroke and coloring done properly without cutting corners. It could even be said to be done with too much effort.

「— Ahh, ahh.」

In the painting of the mediocre but passionate painter— was everything that he had lost.

Yuka Sankrei was smiling. The corners of her exquisite lips were slightly raised, she looked as frail as she did in life.

Bada Sankrei was smiling too. He stood by his beloved wife, savouring the happiness he felt.

And then— in front of the harmonious couple standing were a boy and a girl standing side by side.

A dark-haired boy standing with his chest raised arrogantly, enjoying his parent's love.

And a vermillion-haired girl standing stoically beside the boy.

「— Ahhhh......!」

Holding the frames of the painting with both of his trembling arms, Ikuta Solork cried wildly.

The scene from his past was right inside this painting. He wanted to protect it all, but failed. There was no mincing it, he failed to protect it.

He missed his hometown so much that it tore at his chest, the tears that should have run dry two years ago rolled down his cheeks. The happy times that were forever gone, striking the heart of the youth who was living in the present that had completely changed.

— In the past, he didn't have any doubts. His past self believed deeply that this scene would last forever. He was confident that he could protect it no matter what happens. He was sure that if she was by his side, as long as they were together, there was nothing to fear.

But he lost it all piece by piece. His father died in a place he couldn't reach, his mother passed away right before his eyes, and the girl expired right in his arms. He did all that he could, but the lives he wanted to protect still slipped through his fingers

And then, he was all alone. He was as good as dead, wasting his life away.

He didn't even know why he was still breathing—

「— The painting is 『Family portrait』. He drew it when my daughter went over to visit.」

When the crying subsided, Solvenares said in place of the silence. His words didn't have the steel-like resolve he usually had.

「Including this painting, these are the Bada's belonging that you refused to accept in the past. Back then, you said— 『I don't know that person who chose to protect his country instead of his family.』」

「......」

「As his son, it couldn't be helped that you think that way. As the person who caused his ultimate demise, I don't have the right to say anything. Except for this one thing that I must tell you one day. That wasn't Bada's choice.」

His crimson eyes were saying all that happened today was for the sake of relaying this point.

「Back then, in order to fend off the Kioka army's grand invasion, either Bada or me had to engage them. However, the edict forbids us from mobilizing. And so, one of us had to defy the edict and be prepared to be convicted for being a war criminal.」

Solvenares said. The dark-haired youth intentionally avoid asking for the truth behind his father's death.

「At that time, I gleefully thought that it was my time to face death. I had complete trust in Bada, and thought of him as the only candidate to take the reins of the Imperial army, after the Igsem leaves the main stage.

But thinking back now, this thinking stems from my own weakness. I admit that deep inside, I was at my limits watching the twisted existence of the Empire over such a long period of time. I was searching for a candidate to take over the heavy burdens of the Igsem, and I saw the potential in your father. I foolishly held such expectations of him.」

Each of his words oozed with self reproach. General Shiba gulped.

「As you know, Bada didn't have such grand ambitions, and didn't enlist voluntarily in the first place. From a bystander's perspective, his meteoric rise through the ranks looked amazing, but he just thought of it as a byproduct of surviving numerous obstacles after getting dumped on the frontlines. You are probably familiar with similar situations.

Despite that, or because of that, he was more dazzling than anyone on the battlefield. His analytic prowess from a unique perspective on the battlefield, the imagination of proposing plans no one would even consider, and the resolve to execute them. The figure of him commanding was mesmerizing, and I was more taken by him than

anyone else. He was a one of a kind comrade… and a hero.」

Thinking back on his past self, Solvenares confessed painfully.

「Tel saw him as a sort of rival, but not me. It was the opposite, I hoped that Bada could surpass me and rise to great heights. I dreamed about him guiding the future of the Empire. That's right— I couldn't show it openly, but I wished to serve under Bada.

However, the Igsem faction, which included me, couldn't allow that to happen. The high command showered Bada with praise, but was also guarded against his sense of value which was different from normal officers. They attempted to tame this outstanding talent who might revolutionize the country's foundation… The Igsem in me agreed with this plan.」

The man said in a cold tone— During that period, his mentality had a fatal contradiction.

「The only independent all territory stronghold in the Empire's history — better known as the 『Rising Sun Regiment』, this was the result of a compromise in such a situation. He was given exceptional privileges, but he was just a Regiment commander. We gave you so much special privileges, that should make you happy — that was it. That was the limit of Bada's military career, and he had no objections — the one unhappy about that was me.

On one end, I dreamt about the revolution Bada brought to us, but at the same time, I was an Igsem through and through. Given the effect

my actions would cause in the military, I couldn't directly hail him as a superior. With the clashes between the Igsem faction and Remeon faction intensifying, as the leader of one of these factions, I couldn't push for a completely different person to shoulder the future of the next generation — Who knows what kind of chaos will befall us if I acted so recklessly.

And so, I waited for a chance. A chance to change the leader of the Imperial military from Igsem to Bada. For a situation where the Empire had no choice but to do just that.」

This man was forced into a dead end too. The Empire he should be protecting had no future to speak of. The fact wouldn't change even if he delayed the inevitable. For the Empire's guardian, this contradiction weighed heavily on him.

No one realized his anxiety, even the one he had secretly bet his hopes on, Bada, didn't understand how his friend was feeling. No — He couldn't let others understand.

「And so, the topic looped back to the beginning. When Kioka launched their invasion, when either Bada or me had to defy the edict — I realized my chance was here. I couldn't wait for the coming revolution. Once I lost my standings for defying the edict, Bada had to lead the military. Tel wished for the same thing too. I was sure with the change in leadership, the Empire would head in a new direction.

This came about because of the schemes of corrupt nobles, but the results were what I hoped for. I was willing to become a sacrifice if

the Empire's future could develop in a new way. So I told Bada everything I had in mind, and said that I would engage the invading Kioka army — or rather, I was supposed to.」

Solvenares smiled in a self-mocking way with his fingers touching a part of his face.

「And then, Bada punched me hard in the face for the first time.」

「Snap out of it, Sol.」

A voice cried out behind the locked doors of a certain base. In contrast with the red haired general who didn't flinch from the punch, Bada who wasn't used to swinging his fist sprained his wrist.

「Listen, I might be more witty and more agile in commanding troops, but that was all. After peeling off my disguise, I'm just a middle-aged old man that can be found anywhere, whose only hobby is painting, and I'm not good at that either. I won't be able to handle it if you entrust the future of the country to me.」

Solvenares stood wordlessly, refuting strongly through his silence, certain that only the man before him could save the nation. Bada shook his head at his obstinate friend.

「... Hey, Sol. When a country's way of existence heads towards a dead-end, sometimes there would be loud voices proposing extremist views. Those people will be called heroes, taking in the citizens who abandon the old establishment and create a bigger

organization. Then what happens? Right— if he is lucky, he might become a leader who founded a new nation.」

「......」

「However, that was as far as he goes. That nation would last one generation before crumbling… Because everyone except that person would give up on using their brains, that's all.」

Bada's black eyes admonished his friend for his mistake. Because Bada thought of him as an equal.

「That guy will get it done. We can bet our lives on that guy. We can trust that guy unconditionally— It will truly be a headache if everything sounds pleasing to the ears. But in regards to the country's future, this is just another way of giving up on thinking.」

「......!」

「You know why, Sol? Because— in any kind of government, it's impossible for one person to shoulder communities with tens of thousands of civilians. A country is ran by dividing roles to operate it, even for a monarchy ran by a dictator.」

For an onlooker, he might sound like he was just stating an obvious truth. A nation wasn't run by one person, even a child knew that. On the other hand, people often forget what Bada just said. Someone shouldering the fate of a country— many people didn't realize that

the pursuit of such charismatic leadership was already a confirmation bias in itself.

「Sol, tell me what you really think— In your eyes, how much longer can the Empire last?」

Solvenares fell silent at that question for a moment, as he calculated the remaining lifespan of the nation.

「... I can't guarantee a hundred years. If we progressively shrink our borders, maybe 60 or 50 years...」

「Fifty years, isn't that great? Think about it, what are the chances of us lasting that long with the up and coming Kioka at our borders? Listen, this situation isn't too different from the Empire losing the Igsem. I can't handle it even with my time here, things will just keep deteriorating into chaos. Kioka will slowly consume us as we split into factions.」

「......」

「That's the true essence of the preposterous action you were attempting… All this while, your family had been shouldering this heavy burden. You know right, Sol. You have been trying to solve this the entire time. Slowly delegating the responsibilities forced onto the Igsem to others, changing the military from the inside, and correcting the nation's overreliance on the military… That's the future I envisioned. Roundabout and time consuming, but no fresh sacrifices

will be needed this way.

Relying on a hero to save a country is a reckless gamble that will turn out horribly no matter what happens. And I'm no hero. If I look like one, that's because you and Tel had always been by my side supporting me.」

Bada muttered with a sigh, then showed a pained expression.

「It's vexing, but my attempts didn't work. Since I'm forced into such a situation, that means I made a fatal mistake in my political struggle against the corrupted nobles. I know the urge to go all out, instead of sacrificing you, I would rather start a coup. If you are game for it, I might consider it seriously.」

Solvenares also showed a pained face, as if he was a reflection— this was the only thing he couldn't do. As an Igsem through and through, he couldn't do it. Even if it came to this, even with the most loathsome betrayal by the country he had been protecting, he could only die for the sake of changing the country.

As long as he lives, he could only watch over the nation until the end. That was the flaming obligation branded into his body and soul.

His good friend understood this more than anyone else, and respected his way of life— and said these cruel lines with that in mind.

「However— with that in mind, I think we should protect the Empire. At least for now. Until we find an option other than dumping on a non-existent hero. If someone like me founded a new nation through martial prowess, the situation would be no different than one millennium ago. That nation would disappear like bubbles, and history will repeat itself.」

「......」

「There are no heroes here. In any case, I can't stand the unsightly view of us relying on that sort of thing— With that as a preface, what should we consider and what should we do, Sol?」

Bada said and grabbed his friend's shoulders with both hands, signifying that they had finally reached the starting point of their negotiation.

「Either you or me will lead our troops to engage the enemy. It's vexing, but this part won't change. It will be a big problem if we leave the invading army alone, and to engage them, there is a need to defy the edict and mobilize the troops.」

Solvenares nodded heavily. Their choices were limited.

「And obviously, defying the edict means a death sentence. Which means— one of us will die after fending off the invading army.」

「......」

「In that case, drawing lots is a method— but before that, I hope you can hear me out. I will be frank, instead of the 20 million citizens, there are things I prioritize above them. My wife and son's future.」

The moment he heard that, Solvenares was relieved. He was glad to have avoided the worst scenario of forcing his friend onto the battlefield and become the lone survivor.

He would then say—
I will leave the rest to you
.

Despite their conversation, Sol's trust towards Bada remained unwavering. He believe that if it was him, this man would guide the country and family in a good direction,

「And so, I hope you can let me go this time.」

Bada's direct refusal made Solvenares stand stiffly in place.

「The reason is simple. If you are executed as a war criminal at this time, the Igsem clan will be destroyed. It irks me to say this, but this is probably the goal of the fox who created this situation. When that time comes— I don't have the confidence to save Yatori.」

When he heard that, the vermillion-haired general felt as if his heart was stabbed. Bada hung his head with a sigh.

「I'm sorry, Sol. I couldn't persuade your daughter… During those three months, I did everything I can to change it, but that child will walk down the path of destruction together with her clan.」

「... Why did you bring up my daughter? Aren't you going to protect the future of your wife and son?」

「That's right, I want to protect them. To protect Ikuta's future, that girl's existence will be necessary— I understand clearly during her three months stay with us. The two of them should stay together. A meeting like that is once in a lifetime.」

The gentle expression on his face completely convinced Solvenares. The unqualified father who wished for salvation asked Bada to take care of his daughter, and Bada treated her like one of his own. A daughter he wouldn't hesitate to protect, just like his wife and son.

「... Destroying the whole clan after your execution would also apply to the Sankrei family...」

「Indeed. However, Ikuta wouldn't be defeated just with that. He is not bound by his family name, even if he is no longer a Sankrei, he will find many ways to survive. That's the kind of person he is.」

「It will be hard on your wife too. She has always been frail.」

「If Ikuta and her leaned on each other, they will manage. As for their living expenses… I will be counting on you for that, Sol. You won't turn me down, right?」

Bada's smile was filled with complete trust. Solvenares clenched his fists so tightly that his veins were showing.

「... Do you understand? You won't even have a chance to bid them farewell.」

「My son will hate me— but it can't be helped. It's all because we adults didn't do good enough.」

Bada nodded with a pained expression. His old friend wanted to interject, but was stopped by what Bada said next.

「That's a load off my chest. I didn't enlist willingly, and have no intentions of becoming a hero. However— I chose to become a father. No one forced me and I didn't just go along with the flow, I chose this role myself.」

「...!...」

「Hence— this is the best reason for a human to give up their life. I want to be the father of those two children until the end. Do you get

it, Sol?—」

「— Your father, Bada Sankrei, didn't die for the sake of his country. 」

Opening eyes after finishing his reminiscence of the past, Solvenares returned his gaze to the youth and said to him.

「The thing he is trying to protect is right here. It's all in this painting. Including my daughter.」

He couldn't bear to look and lowered his gaze. The reaction of many people when facing the things overly precious to them.

「The future of living together with his loving wife and two children. That was the only thing Bada held on to in his last battle. He used everything to win— then died. Unlike me who lost the right from the very beginning, he was your father until the very end.」

The man said with the reputation of his friend at sake. The moment he heard that, the youth's shoulders quivered.

「...... I, I know...」

As tears rolled down his cheeks, he spoke for the first time in two years.

「... I know Dad loved me and protected me. When I think back on my childhood, it only reaffirms that. I understand now— those three months were the world to me. That's why I want to protect them. Protect my cherished things and head into the future… But I can't even do that. I was powerless and lost my parents, then lost her because of my weakness...」

He refuted his self worth strongly, his sense of loss was so strong that he couldn't even move a finger. Overlapping the feelings eating away at the youth with his own, the vermillion-haired general asked quietly.

「Let me ask you one thing. My daughter— Yatori, did she ask anything of you in the end?」

When he was asked that, numerous words welled up in the youth's mind— but the answer was just one sentence.

「... There's no need to protect the nation. No matter what, protect the girl named Chamille.」

「— That's what that child said?」

Solvenares was dumbfounded. As an Igsem, he understood the heavy implication behind these words.

「... The descendent of Igsem, the sword that protects the Empire, her last words were something aside from worrying about the

nation’s future? That is the best proof— your existence has saved my daughter’s humanity.」

The man believed that this youth didn’t need to regret anything. Failing to protect the vermillion-haired girl resulting in her early death was all the fault of her father. The blame all rested on Solvenares Igsem alone.

So the youth just needs to take pride in what he has accomplished.

「I’m a wimp of a father. I’m just related to her by blood, and have done nothing for her as her kin. I’m not qualified to say anything now… It might be thick skinned for me to say this, but I want to thank you. Thank you, Ikuta Solork— Thanks to you, Yatorishino’s heart lives on.」

The vermillion-haired girl’s father said with his head bowed. Ikuta was silent as the words permeated deep into his chest.

A few minutes of silence later, Solvenares asked again.

「— What do you wish for?」

「……」

「With the establishment of the current government, the Igsem has been relieved of its duty as guardians of the Empire. The future of the nation lies in the hands of the new Empress and the Remeon

faction now, I’m not qualified to interfere with their decision. My body is but a relic of the past, and my only thoughts are to rust away together with my twin blades. However...」

The man took a step forward. The last thing in his heart spurred his rotting body forward.

「However— I will say this. If my daughter’s will that persist til her end still lives within you—」

He knelt before the youth— the person he wanted to adopt at one point. The subject he wanted to kill at one point. The orphaned son of his good friend, the soul of her late daughter. The man had countless reasons to help this youth. And no obligations could hold him back.

「I hope to achieve that goal when my life expire.」

He was hopelessly late, but Solvenares still held on to this wish. From this moment on, he would play the role of Yatorishino Igsem’s father properly until he drew his last breath. And help Ikuta Solork, who was her other half.

He would live as a father and a human until the end of his life. Just like what Bada Sankrei did.

「... I didn’t, lose...」

In the face of that man’s determination, the dark-haired youth recalled her last words.

「......Yatori...」

The vermillion-haired girl thanked him. She thanked him for having met her.

Then, why didn’t he look at how she lived until the very end?

— *You can raise your head, Ikuta.*

All the times they spent together. All the things, the joy and sadness they shared, the countless precious gems. He didn’t lose them. Every shard was still in his heart.

— *You fulfilled your promise.*

Her last words still rang clearly in his ears. The youth knew that she meant every word she said.

「— Can I… think of it that way?」

Take that the promise had been fulfilled.
Take her hand and guide her to happiness
— the promise he made to his mother was fulfilled at that moment.
Take it that meeting him, and the days they spent together brought

light to Yatorishino Igsem’s life.

There was no doubt about that. That was what she told him before she died. However— the one who couldn’t accept this answer was him.

… Because he wanted to spend more time with her.

… He wanted to head down the path into the distant future by her side.

He was filled with unending regret for not reaching this bright future.

However, there was something he didn’t lose. The will she left behind.

The thing he wanted to protect more than anything else. Yatorishino’s heart lives on in him.

And so— he needed to stop playing dead and take a step forward.

「...Chief of Staff.」

The youth made up his mind and said:

「Can you get me a crutch?」

「...! Of course!」

The face of General Shiba who heard this request brightened. Ikuta took the crutch from him and got up with a wobble. He overcame the lingering pain of his arrow wound and atrophied leg muscles— and stood.

「She— Chamille, where is she?」

「Her Majesty is in the mountains to the north, probably engaged in battle.」

His Chief of Staff answered elatedly. There was an ominous feel to that report, but General Shiba couldn't hold back his excitement— no night lasts forever, the dawn will always come. He kept that hope the dark haired youth said to him in the past until this day. He was about to witness the coming dawn for the third time.

「I see, I understand the situation now— can you prepare a cavalry unit? At least one company, a battalion if possible. An elite unit that prioritize speed.」

「I will ready the men. It's not convenient for you to take to the frontlines with your leg injuries, what about the frontline commander?」

「There's a perfect candidate right before me.」

Ikuta said without hesitation as he looked at the vermillion-haired general. As he glanced at Solvenares who stood to answer his request, the youth rested his hand on the shortsword on his waist.

「Sorry, Yatori, I'm finally awake now… I slept for too long. I will have to apologize to the guys in the Knights Corp.」

The youth muttered to himself as he opened his waist pouch to pat Kusu's head. His partner Luminous Sprite who stayed by his side for the past two years said 「Welcome back, Ikuta」 and showed a gentle smile.

With his hands on the shoulders of the two generals, Ikuta left the room. He looked back at Bada's family portrait one last time, burning it into his iris, before walking forth again. When he closed his eyes—he saw the scene his father tried to protect, and before it were the things he should protect right now.

「Chamille, I'm coming for you right now. Please be safe—!」

Credits

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